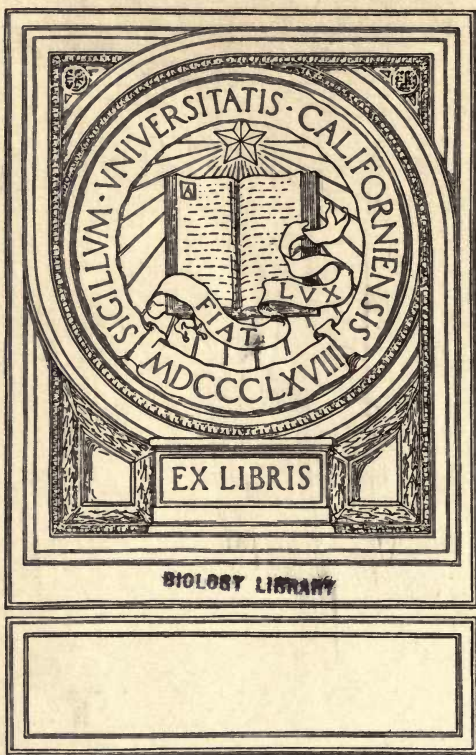


AT HOME  
WITH  
WILD NATURE

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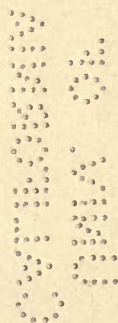
The Fairyland of Living  
Things

Strange Adventures in Dicky-  
Bird Land

Pictures from Nature

The Adventures of Jack  
Rabbit

Birds' Nests, Eggs and  
Egg-Collecting







Red Grouse on Nest

# AT HOME WITH WILD NATURE By

RICHARD KEARTON, F.Z.S., etc.

Profusely Illustrated with Photographs taken  
direct from Nature by Captain CHERRY  
KEARTON and the Author



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## PREFACE

THIS book deals largely with the wild birds of the British Islands, and within its pages I hope I have gathered some facts and photographs calculated to kindle the interest of the ordinary reader and to stimulate that of my fellow-students in the welfare of our feathered friends.

I have been an observer of bird life all my days, but never remember a time when members of the avian world were so purposely persecuted as the present. It is no exaggeration to say that quite 90 per cent. of the nests, great and small, built in places accessible to the general public are wantonly destroyed. The bird life of any country has its economic as well as its æsthetic side. Once upon a time the human inhabitants of a certain corner of the earth decided to exterminate all fowls of the air within their domain, but soon discovered that, although the birds were quite able to live without man, man could not exist without the assistance of the insect-destroying members of the feathered tribe.

I spent June of 1922 on the Westmorland Fells, and shall never forget the sickening sights I saw of sheep being eaten alive by maggots. This loathsome scourge has greatly increased during recent years, and it needs no great stretch of imagination to connect its ravages with the distressing decrease of lapwings, skylarks,

## Preface

wheatears, and other moorland birds. I wish some epicure would try a boiled rook's egg for breakfast and proclaim from the house-tops of Belgravia its superiority over that of the plover or lapwing. It would be a great boon to the latter bird, which is being slowly but surely exterminated, to the detriment of the farmer in particular, and the public in general.

To the too ardent egg-collector, and especially the clutch enthusiast, whose appetite is insatiable, I would say: "For Heaven's sake have mercy." All that can be known, or is worth knowing, in regard to variation in the coloration and markings of British birds' eggs has already been discovered, and there is but little room in that direction for originality. Try old china or worm-eaten furniture and give the poor birds a chance. In all conscience they need it, and there are still some people about who delight in their sweet songs and charming ways.

Whether it is due to the latent savagery released by the influences of the Great War or some other cause I cannot tell, but children appear to be much crueller than they were a decade or two ago. Alas! I am in a position to supply incontestable evidence upon this point from what I have witnessed with my own eyes. If school masters and mistresses would try to humanize boys and girls who come under their care and influence, I am persuaded it would make far better and happier citizens of them than all the unmaterring dates and fairy tales of history that ever bored the youthful mind.

All the Acts of Parliament passed during recent

## Preface

years for the protection of our wild birds are not worth the paper they are printed on, for the simple reason that with the exception of a few keepers, provided by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, there is nobody to see that they are carried out. Children know nothing whatever about the Wild Birds Protection Acts, and collectors laugh at them.

I therefore humbly submit the following suggestions for the better protection of our feathered friends :

(1) As there is a great deal of misconception in regard to the good or harm wrought by many of our birds, instruct the Natural History Museum and the Department of Agriculture to issue an authoritative report upon the food and activities of every British bird throughout all the seasons of the year, and publish this report broadcast.

(2) Let the Education Department issue instructions to every schoolmaster and schoolmistress in the land to give a weekly lesson on birds in the spring, and warn their pupils of the harm they do by destroying birds' nests, eggs, or young.

(3) Close every natural history museum in the country during April, May, and June, and send all the attendants out to protect wild birds. They would thus learn something of the lives and habits of the specimens they have under their care in glass cases during the remainder of the year, and incidentally enjoy a good long holiday. Half a dozen or so of the youngest and most athletic men might be



## Preface

told off to act as detectives and dog the footsteps of certain insatiable collectors. No man who deliberately makes a practice of stealing public property year by year, and knows he is breaking the law by so doing, could find reasonable fault with a repressive measure of this kind.

Unless something is done, and done quickly and effectively, more of our rare birds will have to be deleted from the list of British breeders, and others will cease to render the useful service they have given to agriculture for uncounted ages.

RICHARD KEARTON

*Ashdene,  
Caterham Valley, Surrey*

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# At Home with Wild Nature

## CHAPTER I

### VOICES OF THE NIGHT

VERY rarely are the tongues of Nature stilled.

When they are entirely silent a nameless kind of oppression overtakes the human soul. I have felt this far up on the snow-wreathed heights of the Pennine range during the deathlike calm of a winter's night, also whilst standing wrapped in the awe-inspiring solitude of a Norwegian mountain-side during the wee small hours, through which even the redwing and the fieldfare sleep. At such times the mournful sougling of a far-away waterfall or the friendly prattle of a neighbouring beck alone relieves the almost unbearable tension.

In such circumstances the most melancholy and pathetic voice I have ever heard has been the desolate heart-sick bleating of a lost sheep wandering along through the chilly night, and the most cheerful and inspiring that of a rooster sending his clarion voice into silent space. Both can be heard at an immense distance, and the prodigious difference they produce upon the human emotions must be experienced to be believed. It has been asserted that the high-pitched notes of chanticleer can, under favourable atmospheric conditions, be heard three miles away, and although I have



## At Home with Wild Nature

never made any measurements, my own experience does not incline me to contradict even this apparently extravagant estimate.

The auricular organs of nearly all wild creatures are highly developed. Whilst waiting in the open for an expected Zeppelin raid one night in Thanet I was struck by the fact that farmyard roosters, pheasants, partridges, peewits, and other birds began to give tongue long before the ominous whir of the invaders' propellers became audible to the most sensitive human ears.

The nightingale is a superb feathered vocalist, enjoying, however, the inestimable advantage of performing during the hours of darkness when most of his competitors are silent and the peace of night has settled upon the land. Many people think that Philomel—as the old English poets were fond of calling the bird—only utters his ravishingly sweet notes after all the other feathered woodlanders have gone to rest, and that he is the only nocturnal songster. Both impressions are, of course, wrong. The bird sings as blithely by day as by night, but his notes are, in the ears of the inexperienced, mixed up and obscured by those of such accomplished performers as the blackcap warbler, the garden warbler and song thrush, and the flute-like utterances of the blackbird.

I never had an opportunity of listening to this prince of woodland musicians until I was over twenty years of age, and was so delighted with the bird's wonderful notes that I stayed up all night on a Surrey common



Nightingale on Nest



Young Woodlarks in Nest



Fledgeling Woodlarks



## Voices of the Night

listening to its entrancing melody. I then understood and agreed with dear old Izaak Walton when he exclaimed: "Lord, what musick hast thou provided for the saints in Heaven when thou affordst bad men such musick on earth."

Some of my American bird-loving friends who have had an opportunity of listening to the nightingale tell me its song has been somewhat of a disappointment to them. This has, in all probability, arisen from one of two causes. They have either been led to expect too much or have had the misfortune to listen to a young and indifferent performer. Individuals of every species vary almost as widely in voice power and rendering as human beings, and even the same bird will vary from day to day. At the beginning of the season they practise assiduously and improve until the high-water mark of perfection has been reached, and then gradually decline again until family cares and the process of moulting bring silence.

What has always puzzled me in regard to sounds is that, although I have upon my shoulders the most unmusical head to be found in a whole county, yet I never have any difficulty in distinguishing the call notes and songs of birds; whereas some of my musical friends cannot detect the notes of the nightingale by day, or differentiate between the vehement, purposeful utterances of the song thrush and the mellow measured pipings of the blackbird.

Perhaps this is the result of training in two widely different directions. A modern writer has declared that

## At Home with Wild Nature

“there is no music in Nature.” This may be so, for as I possess no scientific knowledge of what music really is, my ignorance forbids me to contradict. All I can say is, that if the gentleman will leave me the serene loveliness of the woodlark’s song and the divine notes of the nightingale, he is quite welcome to all his masters, old and new, and there will be no quarrel between us. My ideal of all that is sweet and lovable here and hereafter is the song of a happy bird.

One day I stopped to listen to a particularly accomplished throstle pouring out the emotions of his soul from the topmost branch of an ash tree in my neighbourhood. Presently an aged, toil-stained navvy drew up beside me, and leaning on a fence looked up and listened. In a moment the unmistakable traces of hardship passed from his wrinkled face like cloud shadows from a sunlit mountain-side, and turning, he said: “Ain’t he a gem, guv’ner? It’s worth walkin’ a long way to ’ear ’im.” And so it was.

The grasshopper warbler sings by night as well as by day, and many times have I sat alone in the stern of an old eel-boat on the Norfolk Broads listening to his shrill, long-sustained grasshopper-like notes, whilst the stars were reflected in the dark and oppressively still waters around me. Whether this bird sings from any coign of vantage, such as the topmost spray of a bush during the night, I cannot say, but there I have detected him at the first peep of day with his wee throat vibrating, whilst he turned his head from side to side in a perfect ecstasy of delight.



Grasshopper Warbler on Nest





Sedge Warbler on Nest

## Voices of the Night

The sedge warbler is a feathered vocalist that can easily be induced to lift up his chattering, scolding voice to the stars at any hour of the night, by throwing a handful of gravel or mould into his native reed bed. Do anything to keep him awake and he is sure to oblige you. Many times in the small chilly hours of the morning have I unwittingly roused this bird into a frenzied protest against my irregular habits, by throwing a bucket of water, in which I had washed my photographic plates, with a splash over the stern of some old tub in which I have been living with Nature.

The cuckoo will not only "tell his name to all the hills around" by day, but sometimes all night long, when it is apt by sheer reiteration to grow somewhat wearisome.

I have heard the skylark commence its cheering roundelay on the ground long before the stars have ceased to blink during a fine June morning, but have never known this bird, or its silver-tongued relative, the woodlark, to utter a note between midnight and 2 A.M. However, other observers say they have heard both birds sing within the hours mentioned, and I do not think I have ever been guilty of discrediting anything just because it has not happened to come within my own experience.

It may be asked: "But when do birds that sing by night as well as by day take any rest?" The answer is by intermittent naps. I have watched a skylark sit down within two or three feet of my hiding-tent, close its eyes, and go sound asleep at noon.

## At Home with Wild Nature

In fairly high latitudes, such as the most northern corner of the Shetland Islands, it is light enough in clear midsummer weather to read an ordinary book during every hour of the twenty-four, and there bird silence is complete at midnight, to be broken again about two o'clock in the morning. The same kind of thing prevails in the country round about Snae Hettan, the highest mountain of the Dovre Feld range in Norway, except perhaps for the loud calling of an occasional common crane.

Male and female house martins go to rest together in the same nest, but it is difficult to understand when they sleep, for they appear to carry on a low twittering conversation all night long. Rooks and jackdaws do a great deal of talking when they ought to be asleep, especially if disturbed by the sound of human or other footsteps near their roosting quarters.

Although the dunnock is essentially a daytime singer, he may occasionally be heard pouring forth his appreciation of hedgerow life in his own inimitably cheerful way, even at midnight. I once heard a wheatear pipe his meagre lay on a boulder-strewn fell-side at eleven o'clock at night. I think he mistook the light of a rising moon for the break of day.

The peewit or lapwing cheers the benighted traveller on his way by his delightful love notes and the *wuff wuff* of his wings as he turns and twists in the wonderful aerial evolutions he indulges in every springtime.

At the same season by night and by day the common snipe is busy, especially in dull, warm weather, pro-





Skylark with Her Young Family



Peewit or Lapwing on Nest

## Voices of the Night

ducing his weird drumming or bleating sounds high up in the heavens. Hardly any point in natural history—save perhaps the age-old controversy as to whether and how a woodcock carries its young from place to place—has resulted in so much discussion as the means by which the snipe produces this part of its nuptial serenade. All kinds of ingenious theories have been formulated by sportsmen and naturalists, but I think careful observations and experiments have proved that the sounds are made by the two outside feathers in the bird's tail vibrating rapidly as it descends through the air. A snipe never drums whilst winging its way upwards. The sounds are produced whilst the bird is descending with its tail feathers spread out fanwise and the two outside quills a little apart from the rest.

Anyone curious enough to test the truth of this statement can easily do so by watching a drumming snipe during a spring evening through a pair of good field glasses, and then trying the following experiment: Fix a cork about an inch in diameter to the feathered end of an arrow, and then lash on to it the two outside quills from a snipe's tail, allowing them to assume, as nearly as possible, the same angle they occupy to the bird's tail whilst in the act of bleating, and then shoot the arrow high in the air, and in its descent it will reproduce with wonderful fidelity the drumming of an amorous snipe in the breeding season.

The nightjar or goatsucker produces its machine-like trill at varying intervals from dusk till dawn, as it rests lengthwise along the branch of a tree, and varies this



## At Home with Wild Nature

procedure by frequently leaving its perch and making its wings meet over its back with a resounding smack. Gilbert White says: "This bird is most punctual in beginning its song exactly at the close of day." I have heard it whilst the sun was shining on the tree in which it was sitting.

During warm spring nights the amorous frog thrusts his head above the placid waters of his native pond and makes himself heard afar. He also does this by day, hence the call notes of the turtle dove are frequently mistaken for the croaking of a frog.

Many sounds in Nature bear such a close similarity to each other as to suggest that they have been borrowed. The magpie and the great tit use some notes almost identical in phrase, but, of course, different in volume, and such birds as starlings, song thrushes and marsh warblers habitually borrow the notes of other feathered vocalists, as every Nature-lover knows.

Gulls, oyster catchers, and other sea-fowl appear to remain awake all night long in their breeding haunts. At any rate, there is never an hour during which all their tongues are stilled.

The Manx shearwater leaves its breeding burrow on some lonely sea-girt isle at night and utters a weird cry, which has been likened to "Cuckolds in a row." Like the nocturnal notes of most sea birds, it is of the melancholy order.

Of all the voices of the night calculated to depress the soul of an insomnia-racked human being, I consider superlative the sound of a school of whales breathing



Snipe on Nest



Snipe's Nest with Newly-hatched Young



Nightjar on Eggs



## Voices of the Night

or "blowing" round him, whilst he rolls gently, without influence of either steam or wind, on the bosom of a peaceful sea. Some years ago I was misguided enough to spend a holiday aboard a very ancient trawler on the Dogger Bank in search of mackerel, but found it the world's headquarters for discomfort rather than that of toothsome fish.

As fresh air was so monotonously plentiful all round it was rigidly excluded from below decks for the sake of change. Unfortunately my constitution would not stand the atmosphere of a Dutch oven and rabbit-hutch combined, and I was compelled to sleep in the ship's boat with an old sail over me. I greatly regret to record this shameful weakness, because it demonstrates so vividly the depths of man's degeneration since the noble days when he slept soundly in a damp cave on odoriferous home-cured skins!

Lying awake wondering how long it would take my ribs and the iron-hard timbers of the boat under me to strike up a more friendly acquaintance, I suddenly became aware of some strangely intermittent sounds in the offing. They appeared to be a melancholy admixture of blowing and sighing with just the suggestion of a groan thrown in.

The ship's ancient watchman had stuck the blade of his baccy-stained pocket knife into the mast as a peace offering to the god of breezes (whoever that deity may be), and was dividing his time and energy with meticulous care between whistling for a wind and inviting the "little mackerel to swim up," as he paced the starlit

## At Home with Wild Nature

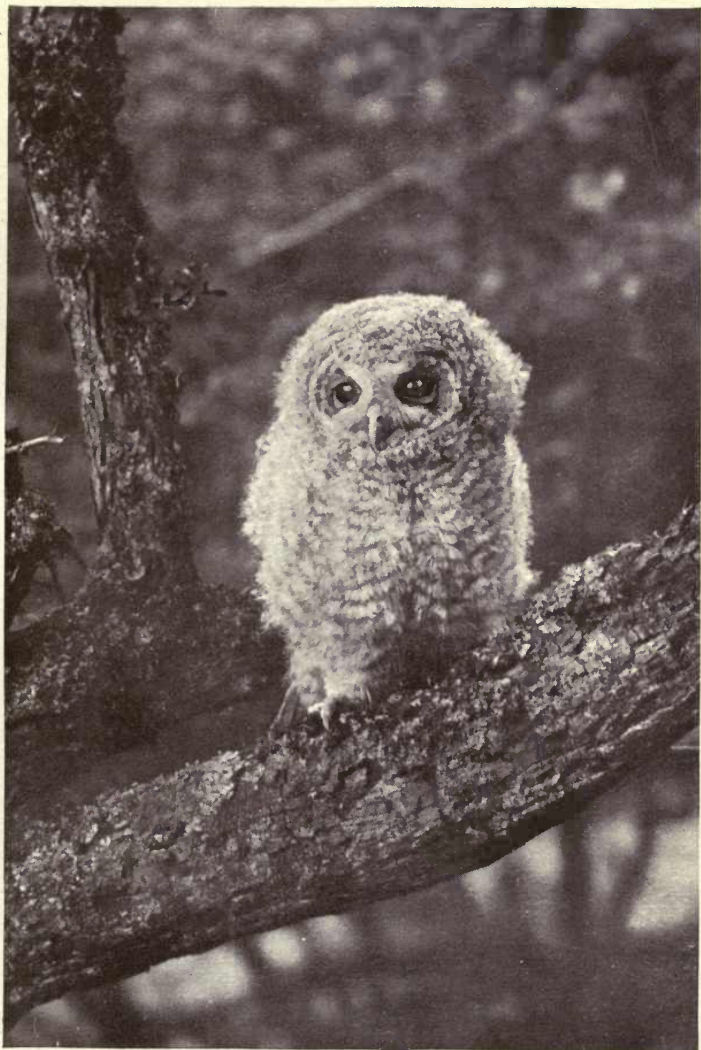
deck in measured strides. Peeping from beneath my coverlet of damp sailcloth I asked this venerable mixture of hardihood and superstition what the sad sounds meant. "Whales a-blowin', sir," he answered. "Herrin's about; pity we ain't got the right nets out."

Since those days I have heard leviathans breathing by day and by night in many waters, and always with the same depressing result.

Owls as a family are birds of the night, and lift up their weird voices in some of the most lonesome corners of the land. The "*Tu whit too whoo*" of the brown or wood owl is familiar to nearly every dweller in the countryside, and many people, of course, know that the highly pitched, far-heard cry, sounding very like "*Keebits*," emanates from the same source.

In the springtime, when the little owl lightly turns his thoughts to love, he uses a fine long-drawn musical note, which, in the darkness, may easily be mistaken for that of some migrant passing overhead. He can also imitate the mewing of a cat or the squealing of a rabbit with surprising ease and success.

According to popular belief owls are dumb and blind by day and their activities are entirely nocturnal. This is a great mistake. I have on several occasions heard the brown owl hooting just as vociferously at noon as at midnight, and have proved by experiments that it can see much better in the brightest sunlight than in the blackest darkness. Twilight, as a matter of fact, is the owl's favourite hunting time.



Young Brown Owl





Redwing at Nest

## Voices of the Night

Migrating birds may frequently be heard calling to each other as they pass over London and other large towns during autumn nights. The notes of the redwing are perhaps more often heard than those of any other species in these circumstances.

Of all the voices of the night I consider the prolonged double whistle of the widgeon the most unforgettable. Whether it be uttered in the duck's winter quarters in the south, or by the waters of a Highland loch, where the bird has a mate sitting in the heather, it is equally arresting. The first part of the note consists of a long loud whistle, and the second, which follows instantly, of a short low one. It has not inaptly been likened to the syllables "*mee-yu*."

Many birds will utter their alarm notes when disturbed at night time. I have heard an old cock grouse "*beck*" in the dark. In all probability he had been disturbed by some wandering sheep or prowling enemy. During the different Jubilee and Coronation or Peace festivities I have noticed that wild birds are much disturbed by bonfires, at which rooks, jackdaws and black-birds roosting at a considerable distance will raise their voices in angry protest.

The sharp, short bark of the fox is a well-known sound of the night in many parts of the country during the early spring, but I have never heard the voice of a badger, although the animal lives and breeds on ground I have worked by day and night for a great number of years.

It has been asserted that the greatest test of human

## At Home with Wild Nature

hearing is the ability, or non-ability, to detect the swish of a bat's wings. I should say that the animal would need to fly very close to the keenest of human ears before the sound of its membranous wings cutting through the air became audible. Of course, the creature produces an incisive twittering call note expressive of its emotions, but this is of vocal origin and more or less easily detected.

Some years ago I was greatly puzzled by hearing a weirdly uncanny sound made by a pipistrelle bat whenever it flew near my head at the corner of a little oak wood. Night after night I visited the place in order to watch and listen, and, if possible, solve the mystery. At last I discovered to my amusement that the sound was produced by air rushing through a small hole, probably made by a corn of shot, in one of the animal's wings.

Mice, and especially the twittering shrews, may always be heard lifting up their shrill voices during fine summer evenings.

The heartrending cry of a hare in distress is one of the most appalling sounds I have ever heard ring out on the quiet night air. Its helpless baby-like poignancy is calculated to fill the most callous human soul with pity.

Rabbits frequently give tongue through the hours of darkness. This is sometimes the result of being vanquished in a fight, and at others through fear when seized by an enemy or caught in a snare.

Whilst taking a bee-line across country one dark



## Voices of the Night

winter's night I was startled upon emerging from a dense wood by hearing a rabbit give vent to the most piercing shrieks a little way ahead of me. I made straight for the place, but upon approaching the spot the cries ceased, and, having nothing in the nature of an electric torch or other light with me at the time, was not able to trace the precise location of the animal in distress, so went on home. I was on the spot before dawn next morning and found an old doe rabbit, blind in one eye, alive in a snare. She was terribly scared, but when I released her scampered off to her home in the adjoining wood, apparently little the worse for her unpleasant experience.

Hedgehogs upon occasion produce weird sounds by night, very puzzling even to the ear of the field naturalist, and when in trouble are capable of creating the most diabolical din. A friend who lives in the country heard some animal one dark night giving vent to the most heartrending squeals. Securing a lantern he sallied forth, and was surprised to discover that the prodigious din was being created by a hedgehog in a trap.

Nearly everybody, in the country at any rate, is familiar with the call notes of the landrail or corncrake. Many people think the bird is a ventriloquist, because it appears able to make its voice sound from first one quarter and then another of the field wherein it lives. This illusion is occasionally brought about by the answering voice of a rival and at others by the bird itself. When a landrail is calling it sometimes does so with its

## At Home with Wild Nature

bill pointing straight towards the listener and then turns it away to right, left, or even over its back, thereby considerably altering the volume and direction of the sound. In dull weather this bird may be heard uttering its grating oft-repeated notes during every hour of the day and night.



Hedgehog and young





Tree Pipit at Nest



Fledgeling Tree Pipits

## CHAPTER II

### STRANGE ACCIDENTS TO WILD BIRDS

**F**EW people, except sportsmen and naturalists, who make a special study of our feathered friends, would ever dream of the numberless curious accidents that overtake members of the avian world.

A covey of partridges will upon occasion, for some unexplained reason, fly right out to sea and alight on the waves with as little apparent concern as they would in a turnip field, though every single member of the family is certain to perish by drowning.

It would appear incredible that a bird should break its wing in mid-air by the mere exertion of flight, yet several well-authenticated accounts of accidents of this kind are upon record. A gentleman whilst out quail shooting some years ago in Egypt flushed an owl and playfully raised his gun without any intention of firing, when, to his great astonishment, the bird twisted in its flight, collapsed and fell to the ground. Upon examination the astonished sportsman discovered that the unfortunate bird had broken its wing.

Birds struck by shot will sometimes sail away for a considerable distance before the fractured bone of a broken wing becomes displaced by a little extra exertion, and then, of course, they fall straightway to

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earth. Amusing incidents have in consequence happened from time to time to people with original, but seldom gratified, instincts still strong within them. A deaf old road-mender at work one August afternoon behind a line of butts in the North of England saw a covey of grouse coming towards him, put the head of his long-shafted hammer to his shoulder and drew a bead on the foremost bird. Seeing him, it twisted in its flight, and to the old fellow's amazement fell in the most orthodox manner, with a broken wing.

The great speed at which some birds fly proves their undoing. After a dark, foggy night I have picked up the bodies of golden plover that had dashed themselves to death against a stone wall. Some idea of the terrific force with which a bird passes through the air may be gathered from the fact that a common curlew—a bird weighing only about a pound and a half—some years ago flew through a piece of plate-glass a quarter of an inch thick at Turnberry Lighthouse, Ayrshire.

Many accidents happen to our migratory birds, especially during their autumnal wanderings. Lost during dark, foggy nights they clamour round lighthouses and lightships in such vast numbers that their white breasts in the rays of light present the appearance of a heavy snowstorm. On December 10, 1882, skylarks were striking the Bell Rock Lighthouse like hail for upwards of two hours on end, during which time thousands must have perished. Upon such occasions the keepers are obliged to close every door and window in order to prevent the pressing throng of winged



## Strange Accidents to Wild Birds

travellers gaining admission and knocking over or otherwise extinguishing all the exposed lights in the place.

Thanks to the efforts of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, perches have been placed round the upper parts of many lighthouses for tired wayfarers of the feathered world to rest upon until conditions allow them to wing their way to their winter quarters.

Telegraph wires are a fruitful source of danger to birds that fly by night, and especially so if they stretch across an open moor or the flying route of migrants. I have picked up the mangled remains of members of many different families lying beneath them, both in this country and on the Continent, and one night whilst standing on the platform of Eastleigh Station, near Southampton, I saw a wild duck strike the telegraph wires and fall into the four-foot way. Wild ducks are sometimes picked up on the decks of ships lying at anchor in large rivers and estuaries. They strike the rigging or funnels during their nocturnal flights, and as many as five were found one morning aboard a vessel lying at the mouth of the Thames. I have seen puffins collide in mid-air, and petrels and other sea-fowl have been known to do so and fall into passing boats.

Although swallows are such quick-sighted birds and are able to change the direction of their swift flight with amazing ease and dexterity, it occasionally happens that they either do not perceive the danger lying in their path or are not quick enough to avoid it in time. I have once or twice, whilst casting for trout, accidentally knocked down and stunned a swallow with my fly rod,

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and individual birds have been killed by flying into the wheels of bicycles in motion, colliding with golf balls, and in one case even with a cricket ball.

No wild bird can understand the properties of glass. Great numbers belonging to different species and ranging in size from a pheasant to a tomtit have been killed by flying against the windows of country houses. If a room should happen to be lighted by windows facing each other, or have a large mirror standing opposite a window and thus reflecting the view outside, birds are particularly liable to be deceived into thinking there is a way through, and disaster overtakes them. I know a country house in the neighbourhood of London possessing a window that brought grief to so many birds that its humane owner had it covered with wire netting.

As an example of the slight mental impression an accident will make upon some birds I will relate an experiment I carried out one day upon a blue tit. The bird was busily engaged in consuming some food I had provided, when a kestrel suddenly appeared over the brow of a hill sixty to eighty yards behind my house and began to hover. Directly the tit caught sight of the hawk it appeared to be terror-stricken, dashed straight at the window through which I was watching, and, striking the glass, fell to the ground unconscious. I picked it up and carried it indoors. In a few minutes it regained its senses, and seemed little the worse for its accident. With a view to finding out what effect the unpleasant experience had made upon its nerves, I smeared some vermilion oil paint on the crown of its

## Strange Accidents to Wild Birds

head and released it. To my astonishment it was back again inside half an hour feeding away as merrily and unconcernedly as if nothing whatever had happened.

Flocks of birds misjudging their distance from a moving object, the speed at which it is travelling, or influenced by a strong wind, occasionally come to grief. A friend of mine once witnessed a covey of partridges collide with an express train in Lincolnshire, and afterwards picked up eleven members of the family lying dead by the four-foot way.

A flock of starlings recently collided with a Welsh railway engine. The impact was powerful enough to apply the vacuum brakes and bring the whole train to a standstill. The unique character of an accident of this kind can only be fully realized by anyone familiar with the wonderful wing power and acute mentality of members of this species.

Pathetic nest tragedies, in which both young and old birds suffer, are by no means unfamiliar to the field naturalist. Some years ago I came upon a hen chaffinch hanged outside a bush wherein she had been in the act of building a nest. She had gone to an adjoining farm-yard to collect materials for the lining of her little home, and had, unfortunately for her, found a long horse-hair with a little clod of earth attached to one end of it. In entering the bush the bit of mould had struck a twig and made the horse-hair twirl round and round the branch and the opposite end was entangled round the luckless bird's neck in such a way as to form a running noose. She hanged herself by her own efforts to escape.



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At the moment of writing this chapter on the Westmorland fells there is a starling hanging dead by one leg outside her nesting hole in the wall of an old barn close by. Her foot has become inextricably entangled in a crevice at the mouth of her nesting hole, and it is pathetic to watch her mate feeding his little family unhelped and uncheered.

Some years ago thousands of people stopped to gaze at the body of a house sparrow dangling outside its nest in the heart of the City of London. A piece of string had been utilized in the construction of the untidy little home of straws, and the female, in entering or leaving, had so entangled her body in the bit of treacherous twine that she became a hopeless prisoner, and died gibbeted in the wind. An almost identical accident recently befell a London pigeon.

Not many years ago whilst examining the chicks in a yellow wagtail's nest I discovered a member of the family strangled by a long fibrous blade of grass, one end of which was twisted round its neck and the other round the leg of another member of the family.

Upon approaching the nest of a chaffinch I had found some time previously in a weather-beaten thorn bush growing on a bare hillside, I was puzzled to see something dangling in the wind a few inches below the structure. It proved to be the body of one of the chicks suspended by a long horse-hair, inextricably fixed in the lining of the nest at one end, and twisted round the left ankle of the fledgeling at the other. The unlucky bird had no

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doubt overbalanced itself whilst standing on the edge of the nest flapping its little wings—an exercise frequently indulged in by chicks before venturing forth on their first flight. It was all but dead from cold and exhaustion. However, I managed to warm it back to life and activity by putting it inside my sweater, next to my body, and it ultimately fledged quite hale and hearty along with its brothers and sisters.

Perhaps one of the strangest accidents to a member of the avian world ever recorded is that of a small bird becoming entangled in the long unkempt hairs of a colt's tail and being dragged about a field until its frail life was fluttered out in despair.

During a ramble on the North Downs one day I picked up the emaciated remains of a dead skylark, and discovered a grass stem so tightly twisted and knotted round one leg that the limb had withered away, and its unlucky owner had apparently died from starvation.

Many strange accidents have occurred to birds of different species whilst feeding. An Irish naturalist observing a dunlin behaving very curiously on the seashore followed it. The bird rose into the air, and flying for a short distance alighted, and shook its head violently in a vain endeavour to detach a round lump observable on its bill. The encumbrance proved to be a cockle, which the dunlin had found open, and which had trapped its too inquisitive bill as securely as if it had been the nose of a rat caught between the jaws of a steel trap. This is not an uncommon kind of accident, however, as a Whitstable cockle recently caught a green

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linnet by one of its toes, and there are instances upon record of lapwings wading the brinks of streams having their toes entrapped between the closing shells of such lusty bivalves as the fresh-water mussel.

Instances are upon record of white-tailed or sea eagles being drowned through plunging into the water and driving their talons deeply into the backs of salmon too large and heavy to be lifted.

The common cormorant is occasionally choked by attempting to swallow a fish too large even for its capacious gullet, and a heron was once slain by its captive, but in a somewhat different manner. This bird impales its prey by a lance-like thrust of its formidable bill, shakes the victim off, and swallows it head foremost. Spearing a large eel through the head, the bird was unable to shake it off, and the captive coiling its body round the neck of its captor strangled it.

Hérons upon rare occasions have been choked through attempting to swallow large trout; a toad has killed an eider duck, and bullheads, or "millers' thumbs," have proved too much for the swallowing capacity of water rails, little grebes, and kingfishers. A member of the last-named species was upon one occasion discovered unable to fly but for a short distance, in a Cambridgeshire ditch, and upon being caught and examined was found to have a young pike protruding from its gullet. Directly the fish—which measured no less than four and three-quarter inches in length—was removed the bird flew away apparently none the worse for its curious experience.



## Strange Accidents to Wild Birds

Booth, of Brighton Dyke Road Museum fame, describes a very peculiar accident to a bird of this species: "Whilst snipe-shooting one winter round Hickling Broad, in Norfolk, I noticed some small object splashing in the water at the side of a dyke, and proceeding to the spot I discovered an unfortunate kingfisher that had come to grief in a rather singular manner. The bird had evidently at some former time been struck by a shot which had passed through the upper mandible. This wound was quite healed up, but a small piece of horny substance of the beak had been splintered, and into the crack produced by the fracture two or three of the fine fibres, which form part of the flowers or seeds of the reed, were so firmly fixed that the bird was held fast. It must have been flying up the dyke and brushing too closely to the reeds that grow on the banks, have been caught in the manner described."

It appears somewhat paradoxical to write of ducks drowning; nevertheless, I have witnessed an accident of this kind in a rough mountain torrent, and once watched a number of young ones dive beneath the surface of a Shetland loch and perish miserably in tangled masses of aquatic weeds.

Whilst taking a walk on the banks of a crystal clear, alder-fringed stream one morning, I saw a moorhen dive into a pool and make its way up-stream like a miniature submarine. Taking refuge in some fine trailing rootlets that swung gently to and fro in the current like a horse's tail in a breeze of wind, it remained there, and I took

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out my watch to see how long the bird was able to remain submerged. Minute after minute went by but the leaden-grey little object never stirred leg or wing, and I grew alarmed for its safety. Securing a long pole I poked the moorhen out, and to my great surprise and sorrow it rose to the surface of the stream and floated away stone dead.

Gannets or solan geese enjoy a wonderful immunity from danger, as the same birds have been known to return to the same breeding stations for forty years in unbroken succession. Nevertheless, a combination of rare natural circumstances have been known to bring wholesale disaster to members of even this hardy species. Some years ago a singular spectacle was witnessed in Lennon Cove, Cornwall. A very heavy sea was running from east-south-east, and for some days there had been great numbers of gannets fishing in the bay. One afternoon, owing to there being no wind, the breakers rolled the unfortunate birds ashore in hundreds. Whitesand Bay presented a scene of great animation, one fisherman alone securing a cartload of dead and dying gannets. Why the birds allowed themselves to be thus entrapped by weather conditions it is difficult to explain, but in spite of the length of its life the solan goose does not appear to be a very intelligent creature, as the following incident will testify. A specimen feeding in the neighbourhood of St. Kilda espied a fish just in front of a small boat under sail, and straightway dived upon it oblivious of the close proximity of the craft. By the time it had reached the surface of the sea the approach-

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ing vessel had covered the place where the fish was swimming, and the foolish bird driving its formidable bill through the timbers of the craft instantly broke its neck.

Strange accidents not infrequently happen to birds' nests, and especially to those built upon the ground. I have many times known eggs or young ones crushed under the hoofs of grazing horses, cattle, or sheep, but one of the very oddest mishaps I have ever known befell the nest of a partridge in which I was interested. A mole cast up a hillock right beneath it and scattered the eggs in all directions.

Some years ago I came upon the dead body of a puffin that had been smothered whilst foolishly attempting to excavate a breeding burrow in loose soft sand.



## CHAPTER III

### ROBBERS OF THE AIR

OF all the feathered dwellers in the countryside the birds of prey are perhaps the most interesting. They are the outlaws of their race, and, wherever game-preserving is carried on, ruthless warfare is the order of the day, and the hand of the gamekeeper is lifted against them at all seasons of the year.

The golden eagle, now a somewhat rare bird in the British Isles, is still found in the wildest and most mountainous parts of Scotland and Ireland. In the former country it is now preserved by many proprietors on account of its indirect usefulness. It preys largely upon mountain hares, thereby rendering itself an unwitting benefactor to the sportsman, for when these animals are allowed to multiply until they become too numerous in a deer forest, they frequently destroy the gunner's chances of a successful stalk, by rising from their seats upon his approach, and thus giving the ever-alert stags warning of his proximity.

I remember on one occasion losing the chance of finding a much-wanted greenshank's nest in the Highlands through the movements of a number of these blue or mountain hares. I had been watching a hen bird intently through my binoculars for some time and felt sure from her actions I was tracking her back to her

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nest after feeding, when several hares, disturbed by a wandering shepherd, came louping over a ridge and right over the ground where I had my bird under observation. Their actions filled the greenshank with suspicion. She rose, flew round and round for a while, and, alighting again in a hollow I could not command with my glasses, eluded me altogether.

The golden eagle preys upon grouse, ptarmigan, hares, rabbits, fawns, and lambs, and is said to be particularly fond of cats, which it seizes in its powerful talons by the neck and loins and speedily slays. The last pair of eagles that bred on Ben Lee, in North Uist, played havoc amongst the crofters' cats on the island. Alas! the noble birds have long since vanished and the descendants of the feline survivors now enjoy too free a hand. I have more than once had a long and warmly cherished ornithological plan entirely upset in the Outer Hebrides by the unwelcome attentions of bloodthirsty felines that had taken to a feral life.

The golden eagle is partial to carrion of almost any description, and will occasionally gorge itself to such an extent upon the remains of a dead sheep that it is unable to rise from the ground until the heavy meal has been partially digested. This fatal propensity has led to the ignominious death of many a fine specimen caught within the jaws of a well-concealed steel trap.

A hungry member of this species has been known to catch and carry off a wounded grouse in full view of a party of sportsmen, and on one occasion at least to rob

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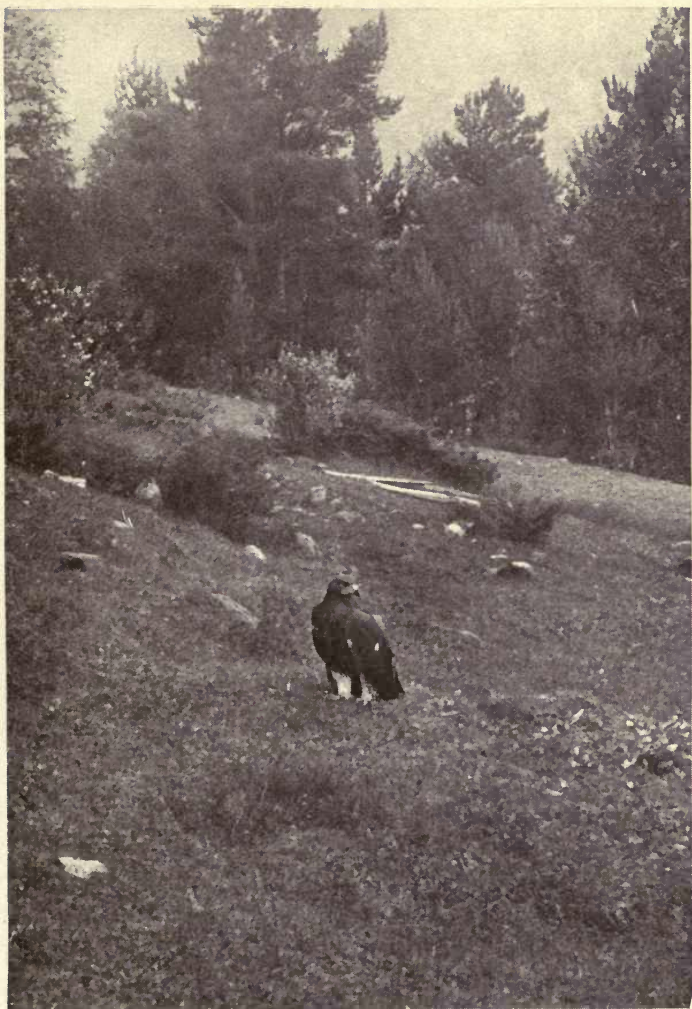
a pack of hounds of its quarry by seizing and carrying away the hare whilst its pursuers were in full cry.

Anyone looking at a golden eagle sitting sombrely within the cramped confines of a cage might wonder why the species has been given a regal title. At any rate, that is how the matter struck me until I saw the "king of birds" at home in the ethereal blue, high beyond the rugged peaks of its native mountain range. It was a truly wonderful sight to watch the great bird soaring majestically round and round on outstretched wings, and then swoop suddenly downwards towards its eyrie with such force and speed that the tips of its powerful pinions were bent upwards, and the sky could plainly be seen between the long primary feathers of each wing.

The nest of this species is generally built on the ledge of a cliff in some secluded glen, but may occasionally be found in a gnarled old tree. It is made of sticks, bits of heather, dead fern fronds, pieces of turf, moss and grass. As suitable sites, such as a roomy ledge overhung by a sheltering rock and more than a gunshot from the ground below, are not too numerous, the bird is very partial to an old haunt. A pair of golden eagles, if left undisturbed, will return year after year to the same place and refurbish the ancient eyrie to such an extent that I have seen one which, if taken away, would have filled the body of an ordinary cart.

Young eagles enjoy a plentiful supply of food as a rule, although an eyrie I examined a few years ago contained only a mountain hare and part of a rabbit.





Young Golden Eagle



Young Common Buzzard

## Robbers of the Air

The keeper who showed it to me said he had never seen such a poor larder, and drew up a schedule that I fear was an exaggeration and at the same time an injustice to the parent birds.

The white-tailed or sea eagle is, contrary to a statement to be found within the pages of a well-known book on natural history, much rarer than the species already referred to. In fact, there is every reason to fear that it has ceased altogether to nest in the British Islands. The last breeding haunt known to the writer, in the Shetlands, has not been revisited by these birds for several years. It preys upon young deer, hares, ducks, and fish, but feeds largely upon carrion. It has been described as "somewhat cowardly," and this I can readily believe, because I have watched an individual mobbed and driven from pillar to post by a small flock of seagulls.

In the good old days of hawking the peregrine falcon was a prime favourite and much in request on account of its courage and docility, but the deadly shot-gun has long since taken its place in the slaying of winged game, and the noble bird is now only trained by sportsmen desirous of maintaining a sentimental link with the favourite recreation of their forefathers.

A pair of modern shot-guns, bearing the name of a first-class maker, cost a good deal of money nowadays, but nothing comparable with that paid for a pair of first-rate falcons in olden times, when a thousand pounds was obtained for a couple of good birds.

In a wild state the peregrine frequently preys upon



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the golden plover and the rock dove, both of which are in a position to give their pursuer a severe test in speed and endurance on account of the swift and powerful character of their flight. I have watched a member of the latter species give a peregrine a hot race for home and beat him into the sheltering darkness of a sea cave, which the winged murderer refused to enter.

Hardly any kind of feathered prey comes amiss to a hungry peregrine, and the bird will strike down with equal indifference sea swallows, peewits, puffins, young seagulls, partridges, grouse or wild duck. On rare occasions Nemesis overtakes this fierce messenger of death. Some years ago one was washed up dead on the sandy shores of Scolpaig Bay, in North Uist, with its powerful talons inextricably fixed in the back of a wild duck. In this connexion it may be mentioned that in the days when it was legal and remunerative to catch and train young falcons for hawking purposes, peculiar advantage was taken of the bird's sharp, hooked claws. If a family of nestlings could be seen from the top of a cliff in the old nest of a raven, or huddled together on a ledge, their would-be captor never troubled to make a descent of the dizzying precipice for them. He was aware that when touched on the head or shoulders by anything calculated to arouse their fear or resentment young peregrines roll backwards over and strike savagely upwards with their feet. Possessed of this knowledge he took full advantage of it by securing a large ball of sheep's wool and tying it to the end of an

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adequately long piece of string. Thus armed he stood on the edge of the cliff and lowered the ball of wool steadily down the perpendicular face of the rock. No sooner did it touch a chick than the angry bird rolled over on its back and viciously struck its sharp claws into the object of its resentment. Unable to extricate them again the unfortunate creature was hauled upside down and entirely helpless to the top of the precipice. In this ingenious manner each member of the family was captured.

This bold buccaneer of the air invariably strikes its prey in mid-air and not infrequently decapitates the victim of its furious onslaught.

A Highland gamekeeper told me that whilst watching through his telescope a peregrine at rest on a large stone a meddlesome hooded crow appeared upon the scene and began to make vicious swoops at the falcon. Time after time the peregrine crouched low in order to avoid being struck by its impudent tormentor, until the limit of dignified endurance had been reached, when it rose swiftly into the air and gave chase. This only lasted a matter of moments, and ended in the grey crow tumbling headless to the ground and the reeking of vengeance returning quietly to complete its afternoon siesta on the rock. I once watched at comparatively close range a courageous and altogether foolish carrion crow attempt to drive a peregrine away from the neighbourhood of a little wood in which he had a sable mate sitting on a clutch of eggs. For a while the falcon appeared to regard the chivvying he received with good-

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natured contempt, but finally lost his temper, and, turning suddenly, swooped like a winged fury upon his tormentor. The crow, realizing his danger, put his bill straight down and dived headlong for the friendly cover of his native wood. Discretion came too late, however, and his greatest speed appeared to be a mere snail's pace compared with that of his pursuer. There was a resounding thwack of wings, a trailing cloud of feathers, and the carrion half flew and half tumbled, a sorer and wiser bird, into the arboreal sanctuary below. The peregrine had evidently misjudged his blow, and uttering an angry, chattering cry of disappointment, circled round once or twice and then made off into the blue.

Luckily for lovers of British ornithology this noble bird is more numerous than it is popularly supposed to be. Its two greatest enemies are gamekeepers and egg collectors. The ever-ready destroying hand of the former is, however, sometimes stayed by an enlightened lessee of a grouse moor, who wisely recognizes that a pair of peregrines do good by picking off diseased and weakly birds, and thus keep the breeding stock strong and healthy. Fortunately the birds often select a nesting-ledge in an overhanging cliff, where they are safe from the most intrepid cliff-climber, be he ever so ready to act the part of a living pendulum by swinging on the end of a climbing rope. Members of this species are by no means averse to making their homes in the steeples and spires of cathedrals and churches, and only quite recently I saw a beautiful male shot within seventeen miles of the very centre of London.



## Robbers of the Air

The common buzzard is one of the most cowardly members of the hawk family, and lives largely upon carrion. In parts of the north and west of England, Wales, and Scotland, where game-preserving is not carried on, it is still fairly common. In the Principality I have had as many as four pairs wheeling over me at once uttering their plaintive mewing or squealing cries, whilst they circled in the air with consummate grace.

This species builds a rough nest of sticks in a tree or on a ledge in the face of a cliff. Like other birds of prey it has a curious habit of lining its nest with green leaves.

The fork-tailed kite, common enough a few centuries ago to be one of London's chief scavengers, is now in a precarious position as a British breeding bird, and if something drastic is not done to curb the rapacity of the egg-collector and the ever-ready hand of the man with a gun, its extinction is only a matter of a few decades. It has disappeared from its old haunts in Scotland, and would ere this have done so from its last home in Wales had it not been for the laudable exertions of a few genuine bird lovers.

During the greater part of the year the kite lives upon carrion, but will kill rabbits and other "small deer," to say nothing of reptiles and frogs. I was once extravagant enough to supply a pair of these birds with a whole sheep, which I bought from a farmer and induced the man to slaughter near an eyrie occupied by young. Alas! the birds despised my mutton, and brought their offspring a rabbit and a half-grown

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chicken from somebody's fowl-run in an incredibly short space of time. A member of this species is always easily identified by its forked tail and easy, graceful flight.

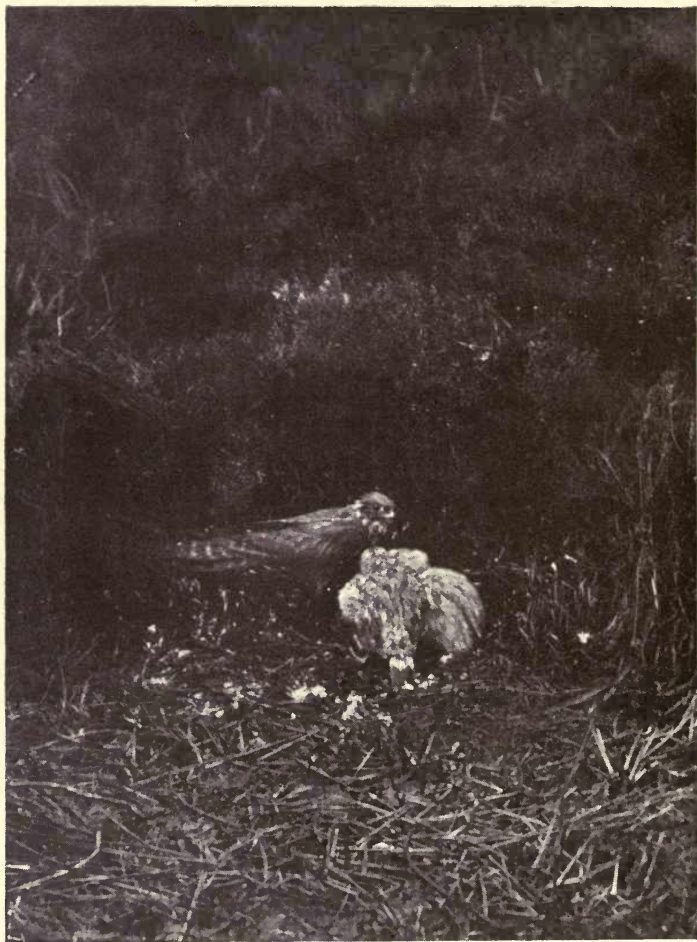
The osprey or fish hawk has, I fear, finally disappeared as a British breeding bird from its last strongholds in Scotland, although wandering individuals from the Continent are seen nearly every spring and autumn on the eastern side of England, and invariably welcomed with a charge of gunshot. The late Lochiel of Lochiel used to take great pride in the pair of ospreys that every season visited Loch Arkaig on his property to breed, and used to write and tell me of his efforts to preserve them, but alas! the intrepid egg-collector and circumstances defeated him, and the eyrie was finally left untenanted about a decade ago.

Like the dipper the osprey secures its livelihood in a manner that appears quite unsuitable to its appearance, and sets one wondering how such creatures evolved their habits. It lives principally upon fish, which it captures in the most dramatic manner. Flying along, somewhat like a gigantic kestrel over river, lake or sea, the bird keeps a sharp lookout for any salmon, pike or trout that may be swimming near the surface, and directly one is espied, plunges headlong upon it. Striking the water with a churning splash the bird rises laboriously on dripping wings, and, if it has been successful, bears its glistening prey away in its strong talons to some favourite rock or horizontal tree trunk, where it is devoured. I once examined a feeding table of the latter



Sparrow-hawk and Her Chicks





Merlin and Young

## Robbers of the Air

kind on an island in the middle of a Highland loch and found it thickly caked with fish scales.

Occasionally a most tragic fate overtakes this bold fisherman. It has been known to strike a large salmon, and, unable to extricate its curved claws from the back of the victim, to be dragged down and drowned by the agonized fish.

Many years ago I was curious to know how an osprey carried a large fish along in its talons, so sat down and watched for three days on end an eyrie containing well-grown young ones. At last I was gratified by seeing one of the adult birds bring along a fish heavy enough to tax its wing powers to what appeared to be their uttermost limit. Instead of the prey being held crosswise, as I expected, it was grasped by the bird's feet, one in front of the other. The head of the fish was thus pointing in the same direction as that of its captor, thereby reducing wind resistance to a minimum. Macgillivray was, I believe, the first naturalist to notice this eminently sensible method of carrying a large fish, and moving pictures taken by my brother on Gardner's Island, where the osprey is strictly preserved by the United States Government, show clearly the wisdom of the bird, especially whilst flying against a strong breeze.

The sparrow-hawk is one of the best-known robbers of the air in our land, for it is more or less common in every well-wooded part of the United Kingdom. It is a merciless marauder, and will strike down and kill any defenceless bird from a teal to a tomtit. Instead of

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flying high like the kestrel and spying out its prey on the ground below, it skims stealthily over hedges and thickets, pouncing upon some unfortunate member of a flock of small birds and carrying it off before its terror-stricken companions have quite had time to realize what has happened. I have watched it seize and slay a shrieking jay, and a friend of mine witnessed one strike down and kill a little owl during the hard winter of 1916-17.

Whilst bird-watching on a secluded part of the North Downs last spring I heard a song thrush give tongue to her vehement alarm notes in a little spinney a hundred yards away on my right hand, and said to myself: "A prowling cat." I was wrong, however, for in a few moments out flew a female sparrow-hawk with a fledgeling throstle. She passed close over my head with the terrified captive struggling and shrieking in her talons, and sailed off triumphantly into a wood, which has been a favourite breeding haunt of her kind for generations.

Individual members of this species sometimes display unwonted courage. Some years ago I was severely mobbed by two sparrow-hawks whilst examining their eggs in a nest built in an old holly bush. They both alighted so close to my head that I could have touched them with an ordinary walking-stick, and yelped their deafening protestations so loudly and persistently that I was fain to climb down and escape their noisy clamour. A sparrow-hawk has been known boldly to pursue its quarry through the open window of a dwell-



## Robbers of the Air

ing-house. Some years ago a gentleman sitting quietly in a London and North Western train was suddenly startled by one flying through the window of his compartment after a small bird which it was intently pursuing. The winged murderer's long, hooked claws became inextricably entangled in the meshes of the hat-rack, and he was ignominiously slain with an umbrella and afterwards stuffed as a memento of a very unusual incident.

In the case of a pair of birds of the species under consideration, which I studied all day and every day for a whole week, the male did all the foraging, whilst the female hung round to receive the spoils and attend to the administrative part of the household work. Occasionally the former came and made a critical survey of the family of down-clad chicks, but never once did I see him bring any food right up to the nest or attempt to administer anything that happened to be lying there. Although the birds were breeding close to a grouse moor never a poult figured in the menu—young snipe, dunlin, pipits and wagtails appeared to form the staple diet of the young sparrow-hawks.

The merlin, which is only about the size of a missel thrush, is the smallest and probably most courageous member of the falcon family inhabiting the British Islands. Like the sparrow-hawk, this species preys extensively upon small birds. It is so bold and powerful for its size that it will pursue and kill birds more than double its own weight.

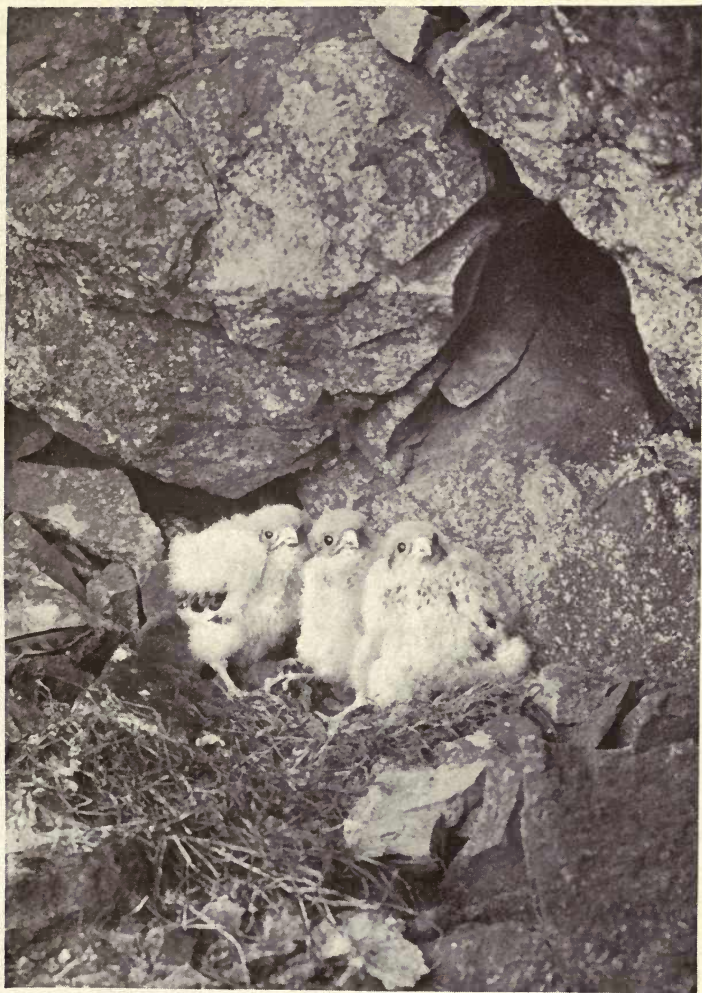
A few years ago an Irish sportsman whilst out snipe

## At Home with Wild Nature

shooting, near a large stretch of water, saw to his astonishment a merlin cross the lough, where it was two miles wide, with a hoody crow in its talons. Personally, I have never known this little robber of the air kill anything larger than a dunlin or snipe. As a rule, it breeds amongst the heather in moorland solitudes and feeds its chicks largely upon meadow pipits, wheatears, skylarks and other small birds. In the winter, members of this species scatter over the country, when individuals may sometimes be seen even in the outer suburbs of London town itself.

Just as an example of the adaptability of birds I may mention that I have found a hoody crow nesting in deep heather and a merlin sitting on a clutch of eggs in a hoody's old nest built in a birch tree, high up on the Dovre Feld in Norway. Whenever the merlin left or returned home she was mobbed by scores of fieldfares (breeding close round her), whose raucous voices, raised in angry protest, filled the air with an unpleasant clamour.

The kestrel, or windhover, is by far the best-known hawk in the British Islands. I have seen it as close to the centre of London as New Cross on the one side and Highgate on the other, and have counted seven specimens on one side of the line in a journey between Euston and Manchester. On the London and North Western Railway kestrels appear to have developed a positive weakness for sitting on the telegraph wires and watching express trains flash past. I have seen them in the act again and again.



Young Kestrels





Nest of Montagu's Harrier

## Robbers of the Air

As a species the kestrel is very useful, for it preys largely upon mice, voles and beetles, but occasionally an individual will take to the destruction of young birds and even adults of large size. I have more than once seen a kestrel hover over a mother peewit and her brood for a moment or two and then suddenly stoop and pick up a downling and rise into the air with it, to the great distress of the mother lapwing. In one case I watched the robber attacked by a carrion crow that emerged from a rocky ravine amongst the foothills of Wild Boar Fell, in Westmorland. The two birds circled round and round and rose higher and higher, but the kestrel refused to give up its prey, and was finally allowed to depart in peace by its sable pursuer.

Not long ago a gentleman living just outside the town of Omagh was astonished upon looking out of his dining-room one morning to see a kestrel standing upon the body of one of his fantail pigeons, which it had just killed upon the lawn. Securing a gun he shot the kestrel as it rose from the still warm body of its victim, and thus assured himself of the identity of the murderer.

The hobby is a migrant and a late breeder, to be found mainly in the woods of southern England. It arrives in May and takes its departure in the autumn to spend the winter in sunny Africa. At first sight the moustachial stripe on its face suggests a miniature peregrine, but here the similarity ends, for in size, habits and colour members of the two species differ.

I have watched hobbies feeding and at play for days on end, but never saw one kill a bird of any kind. It

## At Home with Wild Nature

feeds, in Surrey at any rate, almost entirely upon dragon flies, moths and beetles, which are caught on the wing and transferred in mid-air from claw to beak. It is a wonderful flyer, and the pretty way in which a male and female of this species will toy and play with each other in the air is a sight to gladden the eyes of the oldest ornithologist.

Quite recently I watched four of these beautiful falcons hawking dragon flies over the reed-fringed shores of a Surrey pond, whither they came with clock-like precision at the same hour, day by day, to make a meal, but alas! the egg-collector has discovered their breeding haunt, and I fear they and their admirers are in for a disappointing time.

The harriers may almost be dismissed in a sentence, so far as the British Islands are concerned. Our little country is too thickly populated, and what is left of its once solitary wastes too limited and well looked after in the interests of game for such easily destroyed birds ever to thrive again in our midst.

I have seen, within the last two decades, Montagu's harrier nesting twice in deep heather on a west Surrey moor, the hen harrier breeding in the Outer Hebrides and the marsh harrier attempting to do so on the Norfolk Broads. All three species are said to be egg robbers, and the second is accused of killing birds as large as coot and teal. One writer mentions starlings as being part of the hen harrier's diet. This is strange, as I have never known any other creature that would touch this evil-smelling bird and few self-respecting dogs that



## Robbers of the Air

would retrieve it. The wanderings of all the harriers in our country in search of leverets, young rabbits, voles, and other small animals lead to their undoing at the hands of gamekeepers, and even if this were not the case the professional egg-collector would accomplish the same undesirable end.

Owls are more numerous than is generally supposed. Their nocturnal habits, silent flight, and the fact that many of them live in the most sequestered parts of the country, all contribute to the erroneous belief that they are much rarer than is actually the case. On the whole they render man a great service by the destruction of rats, voles and mice, but when their furred food becomes scarce some of them readily take to the destruction of birds, large and small.

The brown, wood, or tawny owl is more or less common all over the country wherever old timber and ancient ruins are to be found, and its loud and oft-repeated *Tu whit too whoo* call notes are familiar to nearly every dweller in the country. It is said to live upon rats, mice, voles and frogs, but my own experience is that it destroys far more birds than rodents.

Some years ago I found a family of young brown owls in the hayloft of a sequestered barn high up amongst the Westmorland fells, and was somewhat horrified to discover lying round the fierce-demeanoured downlings a headless lapwing taken off her nest a few hundred yards away, a young rabbit, a ring ouzel, and an adult barn swallow. The last-named bird must have been captured a mile away, for none were breeding in

## At Home with Wild Nature

the old barn. In the same district a few years afterwards two boy friends of mine took a brood of young brown owls out of a crow's old nest in a plantation near their home and placed the birds in a cage suspended in a shed, to which the old birds had easy access. I happened to call at the farmhouse the following morning, and was appalled by the number of dead young blackbirds and thrushes lying round the cage.

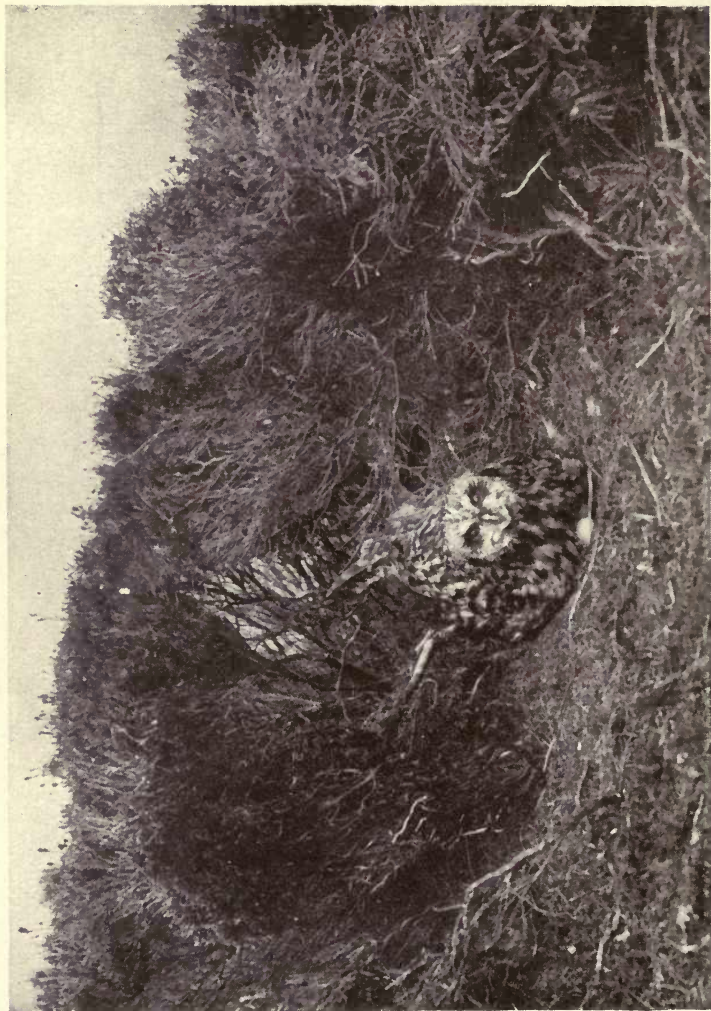
In the summer of 1920 I spent three or four days taking still and moving pictures of a hen ring ouzel feeding and tending her young ones at the head of a little North Country ghyll or valley, and was surprised at the absolute absence of her mate. A few hundred yards away I found a blackbird sitting in a nest built in rough grass away from any bush or tree. Directly her chicks were hatched she disappeared, and her mate afterwards had every bit of the feeding and brooding of the wee family to do all by himself. I felt sure some deadly bird enemy was working the neighbourhood, and a little lower down the valley found two young brown owls in a hollow tree and lying beside them the wings of an adult corncrake, those of a barn swallow, and feathers that had unmistakably come from the body of a grey wagtail, to say nothing of the plumage of numerous chaffinches!

It is surprising how the wild life of any given district ebbs and flows, without any reason to be discovered by human observation in the course of a decade or two. Twenty years ago I could, in a non-game preserving district in the North of England,



Female Ring Ouzel at Nest





Short-eared Owl

## Robbers of the Air

always locate the nests of two or three sparrow-hawks and those of a merlin or two, but during the season of 1922 I failed to find a trace of either species, although I was out every day in their old breeding haunts for a complete month. Their place appears to have been taken by the brown owl, which I found living in little limestone caves far away from bush or tree high up in the Pennine Range. Their diet appeared to be largely young rabbits, and I am sorry to say in one case I found unmistakable evidence of the birds having killed a hen grouse.

Individual brown owls are sometimes met with that are very bold in the defence of their young ones, and instances are upon record of too inquisitive human intruders being badly mauled whilst trying to cultivate an over-close acquaintance with the angry bird's family of downlings.

The barn, or screech owl, is perhaps the most useful bird that flies round a farmstead, and the number of young rats and mice it destroys for the sustenance of a lusty family snoring deep down in some hollow old tree-trunk is wellnigh incredible. I have watched a pair of these birds catch and carry eight mice to their young ones in the space of an hour. In every case the unfortunate little quadruped was caught in the bird's claws and transferred in mid-air to the bill before entering the nesting-hole. On several occasions I have been quite close to a barn owl when it has pounced upon a mouse and have never heard a sound of the bird's approach. I am persuaded that the sharp-eared little

## At Home with Wild Nature

victim has also been in the same position, on account of the fact that the bird's flight feathers are covered with fine sound-eliminating down.

The long-eared owl is a lover of dark fir woods, and does not leave their gloomy recesses by day unless disturbed or has reason to consider its young ones in danger. It adopts the old nest of a carrion crow, sparrow-hawk, or wood pigeon in which to lay its eggs, but if none of these sites should happen to be available it will readily make a home on the ground under a bush or tuft of heather. Its prey consists of rats, voles, mice and small birds, and, in some districts, I have known it to work terrible havoc among the last named.

The short-eared owl is a comparatively rare breeding species in the British Islands, but in the autumn its ranks are considerably swollen by migrants from the Continent. In many parts of the country it is known as the woodcock owl, no doubt from the fact that it generally arrives upon our shores at about the same time as the members of that well-known species. It feeds largely upon short-tailed field voles, and at nests I have had under observation from time to time in the Outer Hebrides the food brought home for the young ones has consisted almost entirely of the bodies of these "wee tim'rous beasties." In dull weather the short-eared owl may be seen hunting its prey during any hour of the day.

Owing to some favourable combination of circumstances, such as an absence of natural enemies in the



## Robbers of the Air

shape of stoats, weasels, hawks and owls in normal numbers, and a succession of mild open winters, short-tailed field voles will occasionally multiply and increase to such an extent that they constitute something in the nature of a plague. The last great visitation of these mischievous rodents occurred in the Lowlands of Scotland in 1896, when the farmers had hundreds of acres of their grass land temporarily destroyed. Continental short-eared owls discovered this plenitude of their natural food and were not slow to take full advantage of it. When the spring came round instead of flying away home over the North Sea many of them stayed behind to breed. Two hundred nests were found, and if I say that as many more in all probability remained undiscovered I do not think any field naturalist would consider me guilty of an extravagant estimate.

In order to show how useful these birds were to the agricultural community of that part of the country at the time, it may be mentioned that a gentleman taking a walk over his grounds in Dumfriesshire one morning came upon a short-eared owl incubating a clutch of eggs, and found lying round her no fewer than seventeen dead voles brought along by her mate for her consumption. Owing to the plentiful supply of food the birds laid abnormally large clutches of eggs, just as members of the same species do in the Hudson Bay district under similar conditions.

A peculiarity of the owls, and especially of the species under notice, is that they lay their eggs at considerable intervals of time. So much so, in fact, that I

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have found well-grown young ones and comparatively fresh eggs in the same nest.

The little owl was first introduced into this country by Waterton, the entertaining old Yorkshire naturalist of alligator-riding fame. He started away from Athens on one occasion with a dozen specimens in captivity. Nine of them died on their way to England, and the three survivors turned down close to Wakefield promptly disappeared. Later on other ornithological enthusiasts brought specimens from Greece and Spain and turned them out in the Midlands and South of England, where they have thriven and multiplied, it is to be feared, to the detriment of some of our smaller indigenous feathered friends.

The little owl is not much larger than a song thrush, and as it is both a day and night flier has ample opportunities for mischief. Some of my naturalist friends aver that the bird is harmless and confines its diet to worms, beetles, and other small creatures. I have studied the species carefully and am sorry to say that I cannot square this verdict with my own experience. May be it is to some extent a matter of district and circumstance. Every honest man bases his opinions in matters of this kind largely upon what he has seen or failed to see.

It is immaterial to this bird whether it has to lay its four to six white eggs in a hole in some decaying tree-trunk or deep down in a rabbit burrow. Whilst out with my camera one day on the North Downs I came upon a large and apparently well-stocked burrow and



Little Owl





Young Rabbits

## Robbers of the Air

decided to try my hand at calling a bunny out for sun picture purposes. No sooner had I spread the legs of my tripod upon the ground, however, than to my consternation out popped three rabbits right in front of me! Focusing the animals as quickly and quietly as possible I slipped a plate into the camera and exposed it, with the result shown in the illustration. Before I had time to turn my dark slide and get another plate into position the rabbits bolted and were gone. Noticing a tuft of down rise from one of the holes just vacated by one of my furry "sitters" and float away in the wind I crept up and discovered a little owl's wing feather lying at the bottom of the burrow. As there were plenty of these birds in the neighbourhood and very few hollow trees I felt fairly certain I had witnessed an ejection for household purposes.

The members of the crow family, although in some respects useful scavengers, are all more or less robbers of the air.

The lordly raven—a consumer of carrion—is by no means averse to attacking a newly-born lamb, a wounded duck, sickly grouse, young rabbit, or other creature its great size and strength persuade it capable of being successfully overpowered. When a pair of these birds discover some human intruder too close to their nest to render it safe to fly home with the food they have brought for their young, they not infrequently hide it and go away in search of further supplies. The "raven's kiss" is not as some observers have concluded an entirely nuptial display, for a pair of

## At Home with Wild Nature

these birds will sometimes stand and toy with each other's powerful beaks, whilst labouring under great emotional distress for the safety of a family of young ones nearly ready to fledge.

I know of no enemy—not even the dreaded peregrine falcon—that can put the fear of death into the heart of a red grouse with greater speed and thoroughness than the raven. On a fine frosty November morning a moor may at break of day appear to be alive with grouse calling far and near in joyous welcome of the coming day, but if a raven should, unseen behind some sheltering ridge, utter a single note, every voice is hushed instantly, and the whole neighbourhood becomes one vast solitude of aching silence.

The carrion crow is, on account of its greater numerical strength, far more mischievous than the raven. It will bite off the tongue of a lamb in the process of being born, or peck the eyes out of the head of a “cast” sheep\* with equal readiness. I should characterize it as by far the greatest winged egg thief in the British Islands. Some years ago my brother and I picked up the empty shells of no fewer than sixty-four grouse eggs, and twelve belonging to the common partridge, under a tree containing a carrion crow's nest with only two young ones in it. A crow in search of the nest of any ground breeding bird flies so low that its wings almost brush the heather or grass, and if it should succeed in scaring a sitter off her eggs

\* A sheep that has rolled over on its back in some slight declivity in the ground and cannot regain its feet on account of the heavy fleece it is wearing at the time.



## Robbers of the Air

woe betide that poor mother bird's treasures. In the spring of 1920 I watched a carrion crow hunting a rough, bent-clad pasture on a Westmorland fellside. It flushed a rather exposed grouse from her nest, but catching sight of me not more than a gunshot away, instead of alighting sheered off and disappeared in a thickly wooded ghyll half a mile away. Although baulked for the moment this sable marauder had evidently made careful mental notes of its find, for the eggs afterwards disappeared at the rate of one per day.

A strange thing I have noticed over and over again about both this bird and the great black-backed gull is that if the field naturalist should find and examine the nest of a bird of any other species in a neighbourhood where either of these egg thieves is common that nest is almost certain to be robbed. In the case of the gull it is perhaps nothing very wonderful, because several individuals are generally hovering high overhead keenly watching and noting proceedings. The crow, however, does not, as a rule, avail itself of such an advantage, and in all probability has its curiosity aroused by disturbed grass or foliage, and conducts a remunerative investigation.

The hoody, or grey crow, is as intrepid an egg stealer as its better-known relative just treated, and is equally cunning. I have known a pair of birds of this species utterly despise poisoned fowls' eggs cleverly disposed for their temptation, and instead wage deadly warfare upon well-grown chickens in a neighbouring farmyard.

Our very familiar friend the rook will sometimes

## At Home with Wild Nature

side-slip from the path of virtue, and when wire worms, leather-jackets, and other noxious grubs are hard to find will take to robbing other birds of their eggs and the murdering of their young.

Poetic justice occasionally overtakes wrongdoers in the feathered world. Some years ago starlings evicted a number of house sparrows from their untidy nests built in a row of Scots firs growing in front of a Hertfordshire farmhouse and took possession. One evening whilst passing the place I became aware of a great commotion, and to my astonishment discovered several rooks engaged in the nefarious task of hauling featherless baby starlings out of the old sparrows' nests and carrying them away. The harsh, protesting cries of the much-wronged parent birds and the showers of straws and feathers that floated quietly to the ground as the old nests were ruthlessly torn to pieces by the ruffianly robbers made an indelible impression on my mind.

In the very severe and prolonged winter of 1895 rooks took to the killing and eating of weak, half-starved starlings, and for two or three years afterwards attempted to perpetuate the habit.

The jackdaw and the magpie are both guilty of robbing small birds of their eggs and young. I have known a few individuals of the latter species dispatch a wounded partridge and pick its bones absolutely bare in an incredibly short space of time.

The gaily coloured, inquisitive jay is a stealthy thief, always anxious to learn the business of its neighbours but not very desirous that anybody should know much

## Robbers of the Air

about its own affairs. I once watched one dash into a thorn bush and haul a featherless young thrush from its nest, heedless of the vehement protestations of the distressed mother bird. So intent was the murderer upon its task that it came and hammered the life out of its helpless victim on the branch of a tree within forty yards of me without becoming aware of my presence until I stirred.

It is difficult to determine exactly what jays feed their young upon, as the sustenance is brought along in the crop and regurgitated. I spent a whole week studying the birds shown in our illustration (facing page 52), and only once saw something suggestive of the yolk of an egg trickle from the bill of one of the adults.

Everybody knows that birds of this species in captivity easily learn to imitate dogs barking, cats mewling, and other sounds, but I was astonished to discover that the male of the pair under observation could mimic the alarm note of a blackbird, the mewling of a cat, and even the *plop-plopping* sounds of cows drawing their feet from boggy ground in a field close by.

Nearly all our seagulls, although beautiful in appearance and graceful in movement, leave a lot to be desired when their habits are judged from a purely human standpoint of view. Personally, I consider the character of the great black-backed gull the most objectionable, and that of the kittiwake the most engaging. Nothing in the shape of food, or the mischief done in obtaining it, appears to come amiss to the former bird.



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It will swallow whole the body of a dead rat, or that of a live bird as large as a redshank; drown and tear the inside out of a sickly puffin, or make a meal off a dead lamb; rob a neighbouring gull, temporarily absent from the nest, of her eggs, or gorge to repletion upon the putrefying body of a dead whale with equal relish.

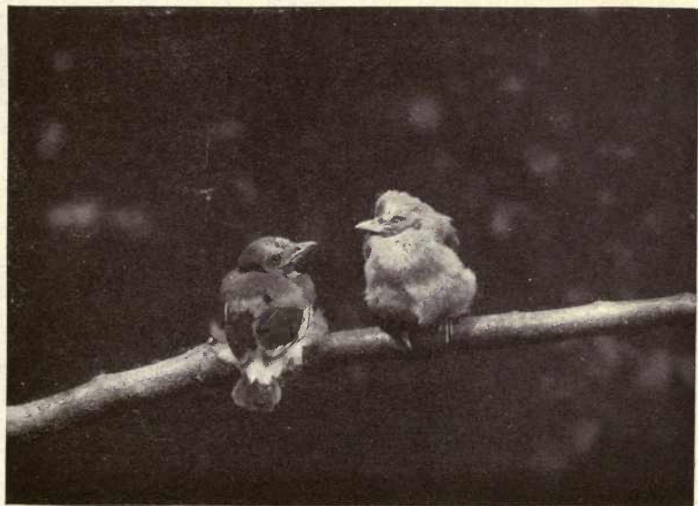
The lesser black-backed gull and the herring gull are equally rapacious and omnivorous, and whenever either of them is eclipsed by the accomplishments of the great black back, it is, I fear, only due to the restraining influences of smaller size and strength. They are both inveterate egg thieves and will snatch up and devour any young bird that may have the ill-luck to come within reach. I once watched a member of the latter species seize and swallow alive a half-grown lapwing.

Mrs. Jessie Saxby, who comes of a famous family of Shetland naturalists, and has studied bird life in that part of the country nearly all her days, declares that seagulls have changed their habits during the last two or three decades. Instead of going out to sea in search of their natural food they eat turnips in the winter, cranberries when they are ripe, corn when they can get it, hawk moths in the evening, and hang round fish-cleaning stations for offal all day long, and this I am in a position to confirm from personal experience.

Perhaps the most picturesque robbers of the air to be found in our country are the skuas. The great skua, or "bonxie," is a large, powerfully built bird, measuring nearly two feet in length and weighing more than the raven. It is a summer visitor to the Shet-



Old Jays at Nest



Young Jays



Great Skua on Nest



Arctic Skua by Her Nest



## Robbers of the Air

lands, and would long ago have become extinct as a breeder in that archipelago had it not been for the kindness of proprietors in Unst and Foula who rendered it the only assistance of any value, viz., that of personal protection on the spot. The Edmondstons of Unst rendered yeoman service for long years in this way, and the Royal Society for the Protection of Wild Birds is now praiseworthily carrying on the good work. I advocated it warmly for all our feathered friends in danger of extinction in my book, "Our Rarer British Breeding Birds," two decades ago, and its effectiveness may be judged from the fact that the watcher of the great skuas on Hermaness has raised the breeding stock of birds there from six pairs to over seventy, and the species has extended its nesting area to the Orkneys.

This interesting marauder watches with lynx-eyed patience until it has observed a gull catch a fish, when it gives chase and harries the poor fisherman up and down, round and round, until he is compelled to drop his prey. Such is the swift flight of the powerful buccaneer that it can dart through the air and catch the object of its covetous exertions before it reaches the surface of the sea below. During one visit I paid to the bonxies' breeding quarters in Unst I found many headless herrings lying around nests I examined, but a few years later while making a call at the same season and under precisely similar circumstances there was not a fish of any kind to be seen. Old Henry, the watcher, told me that twenty years ago he had counted as many as sixty herrings lying round one nest. The great skua

## At Home with Wild Nature

does not confine its attention entirely to gulls and the fish they catch. It will readily consume offal—as I proved by watching one old bird feed another—will kill and eat any small bird it can catch, or devour eggs. At one nest I found the head of a Manx shearwater, and the number and variety of feathers lying round was astonishing.

The Richardson, or Arctic skua, a much smaller member of the same family, is guilty of exactly the same kind of barefaced daylight robbery, and will also kill and eat wounded birds and devour eggs whenever it can find them. If a small gull, such as the kittiwake, should prove obstinate and refuse to give up the fruit of its labours the Arctic skua will in sheer resentment, upon occasion, slay the unfortunate creature.

As an example of this bird's adaptability in regard to diet, I may mention that old Henry, the watcher on Hermaness, taught a pair nesting close to his hut in 1913 to live upon Scotch scone, for which both birds would fly to the little wooden shanty whenever he whistled for them.

The smallest robber of the air breeding in the British Islands to-day is perhaps the red-backed shrike or "butcher bird," which frequently slays the helpless fledgelings of such species as hedge sparrows, chaffinches, blue tits, tree pipits, and other frequenters of bush and hedgerow. Whilst trying to locate a shrike's nest one day late in June, I saw the old cock rise to the topmost spray of a thorn bush close to me with what appeared to be a short, stumpy chrysalis in his bill. To my

## Robbers of the Air

horror this proved to be the heart of a fledgeling hedge sparrow he had just slain and spitted in a dead thorn bush a few yards away. I sat down and waited to see if he would come back to his slaughter-house for another portion of his kill, but he ignored it and confined his attention to the capture of beetles and other small fry, so I took my departure. Two hours later, however, upon revisiting the scene I discovered only the wee victim's legs dangling pathetically in the air, and the wing bones, picked quite bare except for a few primaries, of a young chaffinch in another bush three or four yards away.



## CHAPTER IV

### STRANGE NATURAL HISTORY SUPERSTITIONS

IN spite of modern education, unlimited travel facilities, cheap books, popular lectures, and every other means of enlightenment, superstition dies hard. The fact is that all down the ages man has groped for something to help him against the unknown, and he does so still, hence golliwogs on motor-cars, goats on battleships, and many other mascots fondly believed to propitiate the goddess of fortune.

We may laugh at our forefathers for believing that barnacle geese were hatched from barnacle shells clinging to the timbers of a sunken ship, or any other piece of wood lying rotting at the bottom of the sea, but surely it is equally absurd to credit Jenny Wren with being the wife of Cock Robin, as many people alive in the British Islands to-day certainly do. The opportunities of knowing better in the latter case are infinitely greater than they were in the former.

Although Gilbert White, one of the cutest of cute observers, did not go so far as the Swedish naturalist, who believed that in September swallows retired under water to spend the winter months, he certainly was convinced that many of them hibernated like bats and hedgehogs and woke up in the spring to resume their aerial activities. So sure was he of the soundness of

## Strange Natural History Superstitions

this theory that on April 11, 1781, he “employed some men to explore the shrubs and cavities” of a spot suspected of harbouring birds, then in the very act of winging their way from their winter quarters in sunny Africa to our shores to breed.

It may sound incredible to the practical ornithologist, but I assert it as a fact, that there are people living in England to-day who believe that the cuckoo does not migrate at all, but evades the difficulties and dangers of a long tiresome flight to Africa by remaining at home disguised as a hawk.

The robin is another bird that is the subject of many superstitions and strange tales. I am frequently asked whether it is true that young robins upon reaching the adult stage of their development deliberately murder their parents. I think I have succeeded in removing this stain on Redbreast’s character from the minds of many people by telling them that the assertion has no foundation whatever in fact. Although it has no doubt happened occasionally, that whilst disputing some territorial claim in the autumn a brisk fight has ended in the death of one or other of the combatants, there is no evidence whatever to prove the birds bore any relationship to each other, beyond that of belonging to the same species, and Redbreast may at once be dismissed from the charge of being a parricide.

Robin Redbreast was a great favourite amongst the old poets, whose imagination far exceeded their ornithological knowledge, as is evidenced by the following pieces of doggerel :

## At Home with Wild Nature

“The robin, aye the redbreast  
The robin and the wren,  
If ye take out o’ their nest  
Ye’ll never thrive again.”

and :

“A robin in a cage  
Sets all heaven in a rage.”

I have met farmers who firmly believed that if they were wantonly to slay a robin or a swallow their cows would give blood instead of milk.

In Essex it is considered very unlucky to kill a robin. I was recently told of an instance of two men bringing down the wrath of the protecting gods upon themselves for deliberately slaying a bird of this species. One had a leg broken and the other an arm.

The establishment of a new rookery round one’s house is considered a harbinger of good luck, just as the forsaking of an old one by its inhabitants is accepted as an omen of evil.

There is perhaps no greater confusion in the popular mind, so far as ornithology is concerned, than that between rooks and crows. Although the two species differ in voice, habits, and at close quarters in appearance, every black bird about the size of a rook is unhesitatingly pronounced a “crow.” A few years ago a little girl of my acquaintance informed me that her governess had told her a rook was a young crow, and added naïvely : “ I didn’t like to correct her for fear I might hurt her feelings.”

In the Highlands of Scotland even educated people appear to have a dread of the bad luck a raven is likely



## Strange Natural History Superstitions

to bring them. I remember on one occasion entering a friend's house with the wing quill of one of these birds in my hand, and being seriously entreated to dispose of it at once lest it should bring one of us misfortune.

In olden times when feather-beds were popular and spring mattresses unknown, there was a great prejudice against the plumage of any species of pigeon being used, because it was considered that pigeon's feathers beneath a dying person made it harder for the sufferer to pass away.

The magpie is another bird to which superstition clings with surprising tenacity. I remember as a lad hearing my mother on many occasions repeat the popular rhyme, in the truth of which I think she firmly believed :

“One for sorrow, two for mirth,  
Three for a wedding, four for a birth.”

Another reading of the last words is “for death”—I suppose according to the temperament of the quoter or the circumstances governing the likelihood of a beginning or an ending in the family.

In the West of England a drink of cow's milk, in which a live trout had been made to swim, used to be regarded as an infallible cure for whooping cough. I know two men to-day who, when schoolfellows of mine some fifty years ago, were made to eat a roast mouse as a cure for the same troublesome malady. In India cat's flesh used to be regarded as a specific cure for such pulmonary ailments as asthma and consumption.

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When I was a boy a farmer asked me to catch a trout about five inches in length and bring it along alive. This was a simple task to a lad who had made a science of tickling wee fishes in every beck in the neighbourhood, and I took along the troutlet in a bucket of water, curious to know why the man had made such a request. To my amazement and horror I saw the unfortunate fish placed tail first in a hornful of water and poured down the throat of a heifer "that wouldn't breed." She ultimately did so, but her owner tried in vain to convince me that the troutlet was responsible.

All kinds of strange and wonderful superstitions have sprung up concerning the life-history of the adder or viper, and some of them it is to be feared still prevail. Old farmers in the Yorkshire dales used to tell me that if an adder were caught during the day and its body cut to pieces, such was the marvellous vitality of the reptile, that at sundown the different sections would come together again, coalesce, and the reptile would glide away little the worse for its unpleasant experience.

In ancient times people seriously believed that if you were fortunate enough to kill the first adder you saw, in after life all your enemies would fall before you like grass before a scythe. I killed the first viper I ever saw, but as the singularly small number of enemies I have ever had in my life are still standing, when they are not emulating the reptile under consideration, the belief can safely be dismissed as "an old wife's tale."

The slough, or discarded skin, of the adder suspended from a beam in the house was, in the days of un-

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clouded faith, considered as efficacious against fire as any of our up-to-date precautionary measures.

In my youth I was frequently told that if I should happen to be bitten by an adder the first thing to do was to rush to the nearest stream and take a drink of water, because the snake was sure to do so, and if it beat me there my doom was sealed, whereas if I forestalled the creature it would inevitably perish in my stead. It would be very interesting to learn the origin of a belief of this character.

There are, I am told, people still living of such sweet simplicity that they are willing to believe that if a wandering spider were inadvertently to run over the body of a viper basking on some sunlit bank the snake would burst from very rage at the indignity.

I have often been asked the question: "Do you believe that adders swallow their young ones?" In the days of my pristine honesty, long before I had made a study of the ways of snakes and doves, I used to answer with the characteristic bluntness of a "newly caught" Yorkshireman: "No, madam, I do not!" But wisdom comes to the wildest enthusiast for truth, be he a bishop or a buttermilk, and I now answer: "I have never seen it done," which is non-committal enough to render it inoffensive. One hesitates to shatter ruthlessly the beliefs of others.

Although I have had almost as wide an experience of adders as the famous Brusher Mills himself, still I have never witnessed the occurrence, otherwise I should have been after that reward of five pounds my old friend



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Tegetmeier induced the proprietors of *The Field* to offer to anyone who could supply incontestable evidence. I have dissected many vipers killed in the act of swallowing their young ones, and sent to me with a piece of string tied tightly round the neck to imprison the youngsters, but alas! in not one single instance have I found a young one *in the stomach* of the victim. Human evidence gathered under mental excitement is rarely reliable. Ask any experienced lawyer.

Another lowly creature—the common toad—has had some wonderful legends woven round him. A few centuries ago a superstition prevailed in England in connexion with what was known as the “toadstone ring.” The setting was of silver and the stone or jewel in it was popularly believed to have been formed in the head of a very old toad. It was said to possess the power of indicating to the person who wore it the proximity of poison by perspiring and changing colour.

“An ancient and absurd superstition that would not gain the slightest credence in these enlightened days,” says the reader. True, but what about another equally impossible legend in which many people still have implicit faith, to the effect that “a toad has just been released from some cavity in a piece of otherwise solid rock or coal,” where it had remained without air or food for thousands of years?

I wish one of our professors of psychology would tell us why the average human mind rejects some incredible statements with scorn, and accepts without doubt or

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cavil others, the palpable absurdity of which renders them equally unworthy of credence.

A crowing hen and a whistling woman are still considered in some parts of the country the unluckiest things a man can have about his house. In the good old times the former was promptly slain and the latter reprov'd. The path still remains smooth in regard to the first-named offender, but sex equality has strewn it with thorns for the sufferer so far as the second is concerned.

Within quite recent times I have met country people who solemnly believed that the authorities at the British Natural History Museum in London had offered £100 for a perfect nest of the kingfisher. When I have informed them that the article and the offer for it are both myths, as the bird does not make a nest any more than a museum makes jokes, they have gone away considering me either very ignorant or very prone to a kind of humour known as "leg pulling."

So far as crowing is concerned some old roosters have a weakness for the night hours. Whether it is done to cheer up a harem disturbed by rats, or to take a rise out of some young neighbour by fooling him into thinking day is about to break, I do not know, but the indulgence has crystallized into a disagreeable habit in my neighbourhood, and has forcibly reminded me of an old friend who had a great dread of cocks that crew by night. If his own rooster ever forgot himself by doing so and thereby awakened his owner a visit was straightway made to the fowlhouse to study the omens. If the

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offending bird's legs were warm his nocturnal music was a sign of good luck, and he lived to indulge in further prophecy, but if they were cold, alas! the prophet prophesied no more.

The flight of a bird still exercises a considerable influence over some people. Many men and women, even in these matter-of-fact times, consider it a sign of death if a small bird should enter a bedroom, and it probably is—to flies and spiders. We are told that the soldiers who won the battle of Salamis did so because their faith and courage were stimulated by the flight of an owl. If our grandfathers first heard the cuckoo "telling his name to all the hills" on their right hand it augured good luck, and heartened them up no end, but if on the left it was a sign of misfortune, and was received with an equal degree of depression. To-day you are advised to turn your money over in your pocket when you hear the wanderer's voice for the first time, and to prepare for a spell of bad luck if he catches you with empty pockets. I have been caught once, but was fully conscious of my predicament long before the bird had time to tell me.

In the far away days, when they knew little and believed much, they were convinced that if a mouse gnawed a hole in one of your garments bad luck was sure to overtake you. There's a touch of humour about this little expression of belief, because if the "wee tim'rous beastie" happened to select the bottom of a pocket containing your money wallet the bad luck would certainly follow. I have lost money more than



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once from a defective pocket and always blamed the careless seamstress, until I dropped across this interesting superstition !

The crofters in the Isle of Skye firmly believe that the great northern diver hatches its eggs under its wing whilst swimming about on the surface of the sea.

Many people consider it unlucky to kill a spider, and it is—if you enjoy an afternoon nap and cannot indulge in it because of the attention of troublesome flies.

In those bad old times when wild ducks were plentiful and doctors scarce in East Anglia, if you happened to be suffering from an acute attack of ague all you had to do was to catch a spider—species immaterial—imprison it in a bag suspended round your neck, and a quick restoration to health and strength followed.

A superstition still rife in many parts of the country is that eggs laid on Good Friday never become stale.

Some people dread turning a stray black cat away from the door. Such an act of inhospitality is considered a certain bid for bad luck. We have had an experience or two of the kind, but the thrice-welcome stranger has invariably failed to bring good health and prosperity to either the larder or the chicken run.

My paternal grandfather, believing it was lucky to have martins nesting under the eaves of his house, protected and encouraged the birds in every way possible, with the result that dozens of pairs took advantage of his kindness. His domestics, however, belonging to a generation of smaller faith and narrower sympathies, loved them not at all, and many precautionary measures

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had to be adopted to keep the doorsteps and stone flags in front of the house clean and thus preserve internal peace.

On the River Cocker, in Cumberland, the natives believe that the heron emits oil from its legs wherewith to attract fish. Such is the strength of their faith in this that whenever they can secure the body of a heron they boil its legs in order to extract the "oil," which is smeared upon fishing bait.

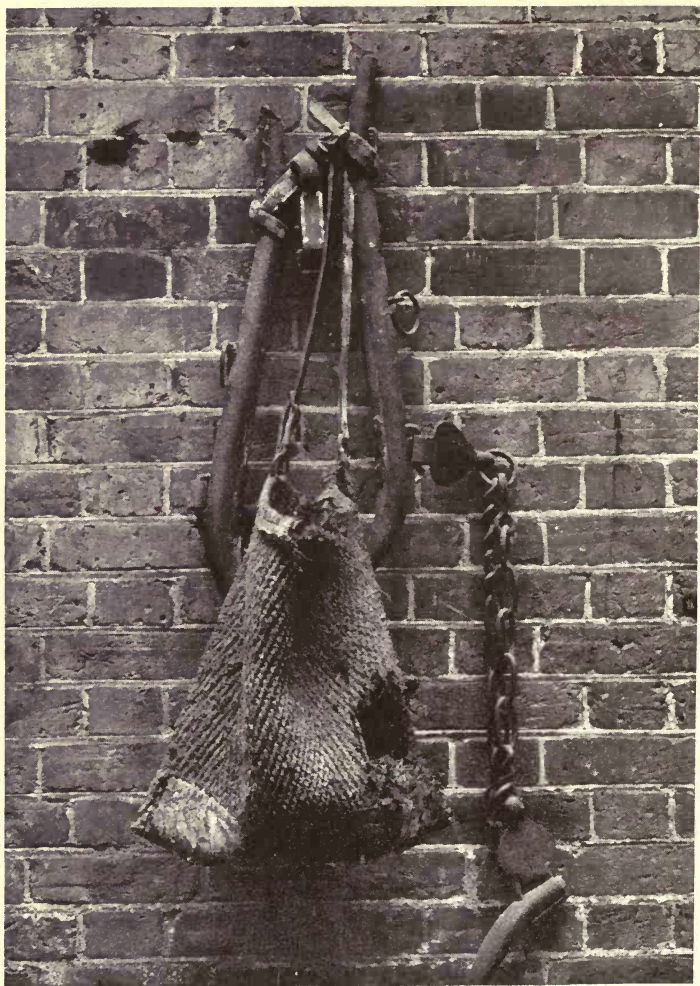


Slow-worms



Adder





Robin's Nest in a Nosebag

## CHAPTER V

### THE MENTALITY OF WILD BIRDS AND BEASTIES

**A**LTHOUGH the mentality of wild animals is an extremely interesting subject, it is by no means easy to study, because of the difficulty in making exact observations in the first place and, in the second, deciding with certainty whether any given action is the result of exercised intelligence or of an unconscious inspiration, which for the want of a more informing term we call instinct. It must also be confessed that man himself does not occupy an ideal position from which to form entirely unprejudiced judgments. His own achievements in mental evolution have been so great that he is liable to consider himself above and beyond rather than of the Animal Kingdom. Fortunately, or unfortunately, the science of biology proves his position, and he must accept it.

When we consider what an immense gulf is fixed between the brain power of a Newton and a navvy, or compare the intelligence of a sheep-dog with that of a slow-worm, we begin to realize something of the difficulties of the subject.

Nearly everybody who has kept or had intimate concern with domestic animals of any species is aware of the fact that well-marked traits of individuality constantly manifest themselves. Precisely the same

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kind of thing holds good amongst wild creatures, and owes its existence very largely in each case to mentality.

The ancients appear to have ascribed all kinds of wonderful intelligence to members of the animal kingdom. For example, Plutarch records that: "When geese fly over Mount Zanrus, being afraid of the eagles by which they are attacked, the birds carry small stones in their mouths to prevent them from indulging their propensity to gabble, and thus attract the notice of their enemies."

I do not know whether a collection of small stones held between the mandibles of a goose would prevent the bird from gabbling, but I am in a position to state, without any kind of reserve, that a mouthful of worms, grubs, or caterpillars will not debar such creatures as blackbirds, thrushes, larks, nightingales, and robins from uttering their call notes.

In more modern times the subject of reasoning in the animal world has been somewhat discredited by enthusiasts publishing all kinds of sensational and badly authenticated stories that would, if true, place the intelligence of birds and beasts on a level with that of man himself. For example, let us take some of the stories of mother birds slain on account of some supposed moral lapse. Here is one: A French surgeon in Smyrna took a clutch of stork's eggs from the nest and replaced them by a similar number laid by a barn-door fowl. In due season the chicks were hatched, but when the old male stork saw them he summoned a great



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crowd of his kind, the supposed moral delinquent was tried, condemned, and as a punishment for her sins literally torn to pieces. If this and similar accounts relating to birds of this and other species were true what would be the fate of every little foster-mother that had the misfortune to hatch out a young cuckoo? Also, how long would the cuckoo last as a species in the world?

In Mrs. Lee's "Anecdotes of Birds" there is a very circumstantial account of how a waterhen, or moorhen, that had built her nest on the edge of a pond added materials to the structure in order to prevent the eggs from being submerged by a sudden rise in the height of the water. There is nothing whatever inherently improbable in this anecdote—saving the unaccountably sudden metamorphosis of the bird, which during the brief account of its commendably sensible action changes from a waterhen into a coot.

Whilst studying ornithological subjects on Texel Island some years ago I had the nest of a redshank shown to me. It was built upon flat and comparatively bare ground, and not far away a lapwing sat upon four eggs in a meagre nest made on a mudflat which had recently been reclaimed from the bottom of the Zuider Zee. The night after I had been shown the former nest and discovered the latter a deluge of rain fell, and the following morning I trudged a long way over the sodden countryside to discover the fate that had overtaken the two sitting birds. To my surprise I found the faithful redshank still covering her eggs, although they were half

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submerged by the flood. With the driest dead grass to be found under the overhanging bank of a neighbouring dyke I speedily built her wee home above the level of the water and replaced her eggs. Retiring some distance away I turned my field-glasses on the place and enjoyed the great satisfaction of watching the redshank fly back and resume her task of nidification as if nothing whatever had happened.

Now let us see how the sitting lapwing on the mud-flat had fared. I reasoned with myself that her home and its contents must assuredly be under water. Not a bit of it. The intelligent bird had added materials to her nest to such purpose that it formed a little island in a lake some two inches deep, and the eggs were lying high and dry on a collection of scraps of dead seaweed, grass stems, and other small items of flotsam and jetsam picked up from the sandy shores of an enclosed sheet of water close at hand. Unfortunately I had not photographed the nest as I originally found it, and it was of no use doing so afterwards, because my chance of producing a convincing comparison had vanished.

Side by side with the most startling gleams of intelligence in birds and beasts we sometimes come upon examples of the most profound stupidity, even in the same individuals. On one occasion I installed myself in a small, green, hiding-tent erected close to a lesser tern's nest containing a single chick. There were plenty of other nests belonging to members of the same species all round me, and the sitting females were being fed

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from time to time by their mates upon fresh water shrimps and other forms of crustacea. I always knew when my particular tern's mate was coming home, for she infallibly identified him either by the sound of his voice or his appearance as he flapped to and fro amongst other birds overhead, and gave him a welcoming note before he alighted. "Very clever," I thought, but soon discovered that there was another side to her mental account. Her single chick was growing strong and restless, and, whenever the mother bird left the nest, persisted in crawling out of its little hollow in the sand and away.

This rendered the photography of its parents impossible, so I exchanged it for a newly-hatched young one from a nest a few yards away. The changeling was smaller and palpably darker in colour, but the mother tern upon her return home took not the slightest notice of these facts, and sat down and brooded little Jacob without demur.

Everybody who has dug a garden or ferreted rabbits knows what an intelligent, quick-sighted little bird Robin Redbreast is. The tinkle of a garden fork or spade spells food, and there he is ready and willing to take advantage of any edible trifle that may be turned up. He knows that ferreting means occasional digging, and will attach himself to a party and never leave it until his patience and courage have been rewarded by a good meal of worms, be the gun-fire ever so hot or erratic.

Remembering and admiring these things I was some-



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what taken aback on one occasion by what appeared to be a case of the most colossal stupidity on the part of a pair of robins. I was shown a nest containing young ones inside an old nose-bag hanging up in a stable. Rats had gnawed a hole through the bag near the bottom, and the birds had entered and built a nest. As the interior of the stable was far too dark for photography I took the nose-bag and some pieces of harness underneath which it was suspended and hung them all up outside the building and close by the doorway through which the birds entered and left. The robins flew in and out of the stable dozens of times, and although they passed and repassed the old nose-bag they apparently could not see it, which is surprising when one considers the distance at which they can detect a small worm or caterpillar. They never found the bag, and at last out of pity I replaced it, when the chicks were promptly fed.

Some years ago, with a view to finding out something of the ease or otherwise of the parasitic path of the cuckoo, I had four wooden eggs made and painted to look like those of the song thrush, and by substituting them for real eggs readily deceived thrushes, blackbirds, starlings, grasshopper warblers and other small birds. Indeed, a starling with chicks three or four days old in the nest accepted and brooded them without the least hesitation in place of her family of very lively young ones. Her nest, in a hole that ran right through the wall of an old stone barn, was placed in a highly favourable situation for purposes of observation, because I

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could stand with my eye to the inner end and watch from within a few inches everything that went on.

Just as I was beginning to consider myself well on the road towards proving that the majority of our British birds are not gifted with any great degree of intelligence, during the breeding season at any rate, I met my experimental Waterloo. One day I found a ringed plover's nest containing a full clutch of eggs; these were taken away and replaced by my counterfeits. Upon returning the bird tapped them with her bill, and then turned round and ran away. These tactics were repeated again and again until I became convinced she would not accept full substitution and that it would be wise to compromise with her. Taking two of the dummies away I replaced them by two of the bird's own productions and retired inside a small stone house built five feet away to await developments. When all was quiet again back came the ringed plover. She was evidently under no misapprehension as to the worthless character of my two wooden eggs, and tried again and again to remove them from the nest, but failing to accomplish her purpose finally sat down and covered good and bad alike. I am inclined to think that her attitude towards my artificial eggs was dictated from beginning to end by clear individual intelligence.

This bird generally lays its eggs in a slight hollow scraped in sand or shingle and lined with small pebbles and sea shells. Her eggs harmonize so well with the coloration of their natural surroundings that it is difficult to detect them a few paces away. Some years ago

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I was astonished to find a clutch of eggs lying upon a rather extensive pavement of pebbles, collected and carried by a ringed plover from the bed of a dry brook to a patch of light green grass some distance away. It is rather puzzling to decide whether the pebbles were in this instance used liberally as ordinary nest-lining materials or in a conscious attempt to hide the eggs by the effects of harmonization. As the pebbled pavement measured over a foot in diameter I am strongly inclined to favour the latter theory.

On the Continent I have noticed that when avocets breeding on sandy ground return to the nest in wet weather individual birds frequently stand on one leg and shake the sand first off one foot and then the other before sitting down. This action is clearly due to an association of ideas, for if the sand were not dislodged some of it, during the considerable hustling that takes place in order to get the eggs into the warmest position under the bird's body, would inevitably work its way to the bare parts between the feather tracts and thus cause considerable irritation.

Just as in the human world, some members of the animal kingdom seem incapable of knowing when to leave well alone. One day I was out nest-hunting with my friend Mr. Charles Atkins, a keen ornithological neighbour, when he suddenly stopped and began to gaze at something on the trunk of a large tree standing on the side of a much-used footpath. The object of interest proved to be a very beautiful chaffinch's nest supported by three or four small sprouting branches.



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It harmonized with the tree-trunk on account of the fact that it was covered with bits of lichen plucked therefrom, but alas! the stupid bird had decorated it here and there with bits of white paper and cigar bands. It was the patches of white that first attracted my companion's attention, as I suspect they speedily afterwards did that of some schoolboy, to the bird's ultimate undoing.

All mentality seems to be made up of alternating streaks of cleverness and stupidity. It is seldom found of complete uniformity in man or beast. Wrynecks have bred for some years in a nesting-box hanging against the trunk of a large ash tree in my orchard. One day whilst studying the birds from a hiding-tent close at hand I observed the female arrive with a wonderful collection of ants' eggs in her bill. In the act of entering the hole in the nesting-box one of these slipped from her grasp and fell to the ground. A mental note of this little accident had no doubt been made by the bird, for when she emerged again, instead of flying away in search of more food, she descended straight to the ground, diligently sought for the lost ant's egg, and upon recovering it promptly flew back to her chicks with it. I thought this was a very clever piece of mentality on the part of the wryneck, for she not only remembered what she had lost, but where she had lost it, all through the exciting period of distributing a large collection of food to her clamorous young ones, so I tried a little experiment upon her. The nesting-box was taken down and suspended in a

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plum tree about twelve to fifteen feet away and within full view of its original site! When the bird returned she ran up and down, round and round the trunk of the ash tree, but utterly failed to discover the new location of her home, until she flew into the plum tree and descended upon it by what appeared to be an accident. The chicks were fed, and away sped the parent bird in search of more ants' eggs. I concluded that once discovered there would be no further difficulty in remembering the whereabouts of the nesting-box. In this, however, I was greatly mistaken. When the wryneck again returned she flew straight to the old position of her home on the ash tree, wandered up and down, round and round, looking everywhere, but could neither remember where she had last left it nor rediscover it. Her distress became so manifest that out of pity I was compelled to re-establish the old order of things and end her troubles.

The result of this experiment was a direct contrast to that of a similar one I carried out on a pair of starlings. They followed their nesting-box all over the orchard, and entered and left it even when it was on the ground.

Occasionally an individual of a species will stand out head and shoulders above its fellows in point of mentality.

We always feed members of the titmouse family liberally in our garden during the winter months by suspending the kernels of Barcelona nuts and other fruit in readily accessible situations. Blue tits are good

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gymnasts, and can easily cling upside down to a small kernel hung on the end of a piece of thread and bite pieces off whilst twirling round and round in mid-air. Great tits will frequently watch and try to imitate, but generally without success. However, it occasionally happens that an exceptionally brainy member of the latter species will come along, and by an intelligent anticipation of producing results from known causes, which is reasoning, will stand on the twig to which the thread is tied and haul it in reef by reef, carefully setting a foot upon each until the prize is secured.

During cold spells of weather in the springtime flies are content to rest on the ground or elsewhere, and I have noticed whilst driving under such conditions swallows and martins flying round and round the horse and trap catching insects compelled to rise into the air. It is precisely for the same reason that yellow wagtails accompany grazing cattle, and so bold and confiding do they become that they will readily run between the legs of a cow in pursuit of some disturbed insect.

Very few wild creatures understand the properties of glass from its darker or inner side, but they are certainly capable of learning.

Two house sparrows used to visit my kitchen every day in search of crumbs or to help themselves to canary seed. If the window by which they usually gained access happened to be closed they flew round to a small trap-door in the wall of a scullery leading into the kitchen and readily found their way to the place



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where their food was to be discovered. Although these two birds—a male and female—had apparently learnt the properties of glass from the outside, it cost them a goodly number of giddy head bumps before they discovered its obstructive powers from the inside. However, their mentality thoroughly mastered its barring qualities, and they eventually gave up attempting to fly through a closed window, even when they were badly scared.

Domestic animals are supposed, through their long association with man, to be more intelligent than their wild congeners, but some of this credit is no doubt due to the fact that the latter are not subject to the same easy and intimate observation as the former.

Some years ago I owned an exceedingly intelligent, but at the same time wickedly mischievous, cat. In order to prevent her from catching birds I tied two ferret bells to her neck in such a way that they would drag along the ground and give a warning tinkle whenever she attempted to stalk one of my feathered friends. Pussy very soon discovered that the instinctive method of approaching her quarry inevitably meant failure owing to the presence of the hateful bells, and out of her mentality evolved a new method of approach. She advanced with her head raised and neck outstretched in such a manner that the tell-tale pieces of metal touched nothing and were in consequence silent. Of course, she laboured under the disadvantage of being more easily seen, but with this cunningly acquired silence and the friendly shelter of an intervening plant she sometimes

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succeeded in bringing a stalk to a triumphant conclusion, from her point of view.

Of all the wild creatures to be found in the British Islands I consider the common fox the most intelligent. I could relate many wonderful stories common all over the countryside in support of my belief, but will content myself with an actual personal experience. Whilst sitting one afternoon in a hiding-tent well covered with heather on a West Surrey moor waiting for a Dartford warbler to come back to its nest, I espied a fox trotting leisurely alongside a plantation about two hundred yards in front of me, so put my fingers to my lips and began to squeal like a rabbit in trouble. Reynard picked up the sounds instantly, and turning in his tracks began to gallop straight towards me. Upon arriving at a point about forty yards directly in front of my hiding contrivance he slowed his pace, and came to the conclusion that he had better sit down and think the matter out. The wind was blowing directly from my right hand over the tent and away across the lonely moor. A few moments' reflection evidently convinced the wily animal that he had better consult the evidence of his nose as well as that of his ears, and trotting away to my extreme left he studied the breezes. The wind told him everything he wanted to know, and he turned round and crept stealthily away to the friendly cover of the dark plantation, and I saw him no more.

Having cited an example of the mentality of what I consider the most intelligent wild animal in our country, I will by way of comparison relate an experience of the

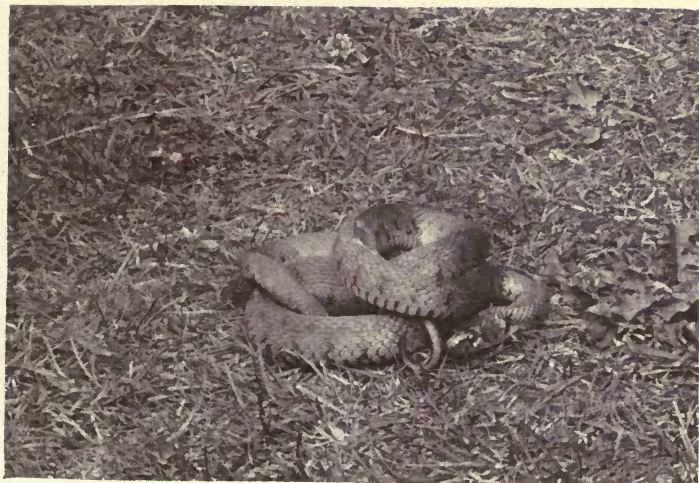
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brain power of what I consider the least intelligent sentient creature to be met with in Britain.

During the earlier years of the Great War I had young soldiers billeted upon me during their course of training in this part of the country. Whilst out trying to show two of them something of the natural history of the North Downs one afternoon, we caught two slow-worms, or blindworms, took them home, and turned them loose in a forcing frame in the garden. The following morning one of the young soldiers wandering round my grounds after breakfast looked in to see how the blindworms were getting on, and dashed indoors to tell me that they were engaged in a desperate battle. I ran out to see the fight, and upon reaching the forcing frame could hardly believe the evidence of my senses. One of the reptiles had seized the body of the other by about the middle, and the oppressed one lacked intelligence to such an astounding extent that it actually turned, and, seizing its own tail, began to bite that under the evident impression that it was part of the body of its adversary. I dashed indoors for a camera and dark slides, but alas! upon returning the fight had finished, and I lost a much-coveted picture.

This experience naturally confirmed the low estimate I had already formed of the intelligence of reptiles generally, but in a recent summer I suffered something in the nature of a mental shock in the opposite direction. Coming upon a very large grass snake I was anxious to take some still and moving pictures of the creature, but soon discovered





Grass Snake



Grass Snake feigning death



Water Rat



Common Brown Rat

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that it was quite impossible to keep my very lively "sitter" within any field of focus and manipulate the photographic apparatus at the same time. Luckily my daughter came along in the nick of time, and I handed the control of the reptile over to her. After making several vain attempts to escape, to our astonishment the grass snake coiled itself up, threw its head over on one side, and, opening its mouth widely, allowed its long black bifurcated tongue to hang out with every apparent sign of death. I photographed it in this strange attitude with my still picture camera, and then turning my cinematograph apparatus upon it asked my daughter to step on one side. Directly the death-feigning creature discovered the coast was clear it withdrew its tongue, closed its mouth, and, unfolding its coils, glided off with astonishing swiftness.

I have watched both thrushes and blackbirds hopping round a hillock of mould in process of being thrown up by a burrowing mole in the hope of catching worms scared to the surface by the exertions of the dusky-coated miner below. An old French writer has credited the mole with considerable intelligence by asserting that the animal will sometimes thrust the tip of his long red snout through the mould he has thrown up and patiently wait until an unsuspecting bird comes along and pecks at it, under the mistaken impression that it is the head of a worm, when the luckless creature is seized by the bill, dragged underground, and devoured.

I do not doubt either the desire or ability of the spade-footed little cannibal to devour a small bird, but



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would like some additional evidence of his wonderful mentality.

I have seen an injured stoat feign death and heard many stories of the cunning of this bloodthirsty little beast whilst in pursuit of its prey, but have only met one really trustworthy observer in a position to verify from personal experience the widely known assertion that in order to attract birds within its reach it will double up its body and roll about like a ball. My friend, whilst dressing one sunny spring morning, had his attention attracted by a great hubbub in the garden, and looking out of his bedroom window was astonished to see a small reddish-brown ball emerge from a rockery and roll slowly down a grassy slope towards a shrubbery. It was surrounded by a mob of chirruping, chattering, excited house sparrows, drawing nearer and nearer to the object of their curiosity. Upon nearing the shrubbery the ball suddenly became elongated and sprang like a flash at the nearest bird, but missed it by a hair's-breadth. The sparrows all took wing instantly, and a much-disappointed stoat trotted off through the garden.

The common brown rat is a great thinker, considering the limited size of his brain, and is able to make clever mental deductions from information gathered by his acute sense of smell, as I have proved by innumerable experiments. The slightest scent of the human hand is at once detected by the olfactory nerves of a rat, and, however hungry he may be, if he happens to be an individual of highly developed mentality in his

## The Mentality of Wild Birds and Beasties

own little world, he passes on and leaves the most tempting morsel of food behind. A neighbour of mine, a retired inspector of police and a man in whose integrity I could place implicit reliance, one day brought me a wire rat-trap, the effective working of which had been absolutely nullified by having two or three large feathers—plentiful in the fowl run where the trap had been set—ingeniously twisted in and out of the springs and bars of the cage so as to prevent the wire door from closing when the bait was gnawed. He assured me that no human being but himself had had access to the trap, and that he had not tampered in any way whatever with the feathers. Needless to add, the bait had all been eaten.

Some people think that the wedge-like bill of an oyster catcher must be an excellent instrument for prising open the shells of the bivalve from which the bird has derived its popular name, or dislodging a limpet from its native rock. Personally, I do not consider it capable of performing the former feat, and it certainly would never accomplish the latter unless the bird used its brains.

I have watched oyster catchers dislodge limpets on many occasions, and the birds approach the task by exactly the same process of reasoning as would be employed by a small boy. The bird and the boy soon learn that when a limpet has been touched it closes its shell down upon the rock, creates a vacuum, and thus becomes immovable, so they strike it a sudden side blow, and off it flies.

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Although this would appear to be rather clever on the part of the oyster catcher, females of the species make rather stupid mothers. I have watched one in the act of flying away from the nest with an empty egg-shell turn a newly-hatched chick over on its back, and upon returning sit down and cover the sprawling creature in complete oblivion of its uncomfortable posture. I have also seen one lead her family of downlings into a *cul-de-sac* amongst rough rocks, and instead of flying down and showing them the way out she has stood on the boulders at the closed end of the alley and yelped at them for an hour without ceasing.

Perhaps the most stupid and careless mother bird to be found in the countryside is the common pheasant. She will lead her family to water, and any chick that is a little slower or thirstier than herself is left behind without the slightest compunction.

Some of the world's greatest observers have claimed reasoning faculty for birds and beasts, whilst others equally eminent have denied it. Fabre, the famous French entomologist, trounced Erasmus Darwin unmercifully for ascribing such to a wasp, which, finding it could not carry the body of a dead fly along in comfort on account of the resistance offered by the wings to a breeze of wind, alighted, amputated the offending members, and then sailed away in triumph with its prey. Fabre, through a misquotation on the part of the translator, came to the erroneous conclusion that the Englishman was claiming this wonderful achievement on behalf of a sphex—a member of the *hymenoptera*



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family in which instinct is highly developed. The dear old French naturalist would no doubt have been less severe and scornful at the expense of a fellow-student had he dreamed of what another translator would accomplish in the way of error for him. On page 200 of Fabre's book, "Insect Life," the appearance and habit of the white wagtail are described with minute fidelity, but alas! the bird is labelled a grey wagtail.

How very difficult it is to understand the other fellow's view-point, let alone that of a bird or beast. Fabre, a typically Gallic Frenchman, will find tears of emotion rising to his eyes "whenever he discovers a new fact or verifies a long-cherished suspicion in regard to the habits of an insect," but listen to him on the wanton destruction of a beloved song bird. Writing of shooting larks attracted by the glimmer of a mirror lying amidst sparkling dewdrops on some sunlit plain, he says: "The lark comes with dipping flight, anxious for a close inspection of the bright thing or odd bird [a reference to the reflection of itself in the glass]. There it is, some fifteen paces away—its feet hanging, its wings outspread like a saint—[*esprit*]. The moment has come; aim and fire! I hope that my readers may experience the emotions of this delightful sport."

I come of a race of sportsmen and have been a keen one all my life, but the only emotion I should feel if compelled to raise a gun at such a divine feathered vocalist as the skylark would be one of unutterable

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disgust. I mention this not to the Frenchman's discredit or my own glorification, but just to show that if it is possible for two men, both keen lovers of Nature and lifelong students of the habits and activities of all the living things around them, to be so widely separated in mental attitude, through different kinds of training, towards the same simple fact, what a mighty gulf there must of necessity be fixed between intelligence and intelligence in both man and beast.

Fabre, although a vehement anti-evolutionist setting his face like flint against even the most elementary powers of reasoning in the animal kingdom, makes a curious and much more extravagant claim for moral perception in an insect. He writes: "While a mason bee is absent it is not unusual for some homeless vagabond to visit the nest, take a liking to it, and set to work sometimes at the same cell. When the first occupant returns she does not fail to drive away the intruder, who always ends by getting the worst of it, so lively and invincible is the real owner's sense of property. Reversing the savage Prussian maxim, 'strength before right,' here right comes before might; otherwise the constant retreat of the intruder would be quite inexplicable, since the latter's strength is in no way inferior to that of the real owner. If she has less audacity it must come from not feeling braced by the sovereign strength of being right, which decides among equals even in the brute creation."

Applying this doctrine of physical invincibility gained from moral rights to higher forms of life reminds

## The Mentality of Wild Birds and Beasties

me, I am bound to confess, that in contests between members of the same species of birds for nests under construction, or the materials thereof, the principle of right has generally prevailed. I have witnessed a dishonest rook stealing sticks from an absent neighbour's nest receive a severe castigation upon being caught in the act by the owner. On St. Kilda, the Bass Rock and Ailsa Craig, I have seen similar punishment meted out to gannets caught stealing seaweed or turf. One is always glad to see the just triumphant, but, of course, in both Fabre's cases, and my own, we must not forget the possibility that the thieves may have been old individuals, stronger in knowledge than physical power, and that fact might account for the victory of the righteous.

Alas ! when it comes to a contest between members of different species the laws of *kultur* invariably prevail, and might or mentality triumph over right.

As an example of this, I have watched a pair of green woodpeckers laboriously chisel a nesting-hole in the trunk of a tree, and when unremitting toil has been rewarded by satisfactory breeding-quarters for the season, along has come a couple of house-hunting starlings and turned them out bag and baggage and taken possession. A few years ago a pair of starlings made their home in a nesting-box in my garden, but were turned out by wrynecks, and these birds in their turn were evicted by house sparrows. It is a somewhat far cry between the last-named species and the first in point of size and strength, but I would back the men-



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talities of a common sparrow against that of the three previously mentioned birds any day.

Mentality is a greater force than moral right in the animal kingdom, I fear. If the ringed plover were to depend upon the latter instead of the former for the protection of her young ones her species would very soon be wiped off the face of the earth. When she sees a marauding gull coming along in search of whatever he can pick up and swallow dead or alive, she knows there is one infallible method of striking terror into his cowardly heart, viz., by flying up and pecking behind and beneath his body. I have seen it done, and heard the gull crying out in abject fear whilst beating a hasty retreat.

Again, and in final allusion to the venerable French naturalist's moral rights doctrine, which I fear is purely human, who has not seen a pair of idle, old common sparrows gossiping on some housetop, or enjoying a dust bath, whilst a pair of industrious martins laboured hard constructing a wee cradle of mud under a neighbouring eave? No sooner is the nest ready for occupation than in will pop one of the sparrows during the rightful owner's absence, and the human beholder is furnished with an odious example of "might over right." I have on two or three occasions in this and other countries watched these little gutter ruffians hurl house martins' eggs one by one out of the nest and take possession.

It has been written that in cases of this kind the enraged martins, assisted by neighbours, will fly in

## The Mentality of Wild Birds and Beasties

search of mud and therewith plaster up the entrance of the stolen nest, imprisoning the dastardly robber for life. Absolute proof of this would be rather gratifying, but alas! for the truth or probability of this kind of poetic justice, the thief's powerful bill—and mentality—against the soft materials of the prison door appear to have been overlooked.

## CHAPTER VI

### O'ER FELL AND DALE

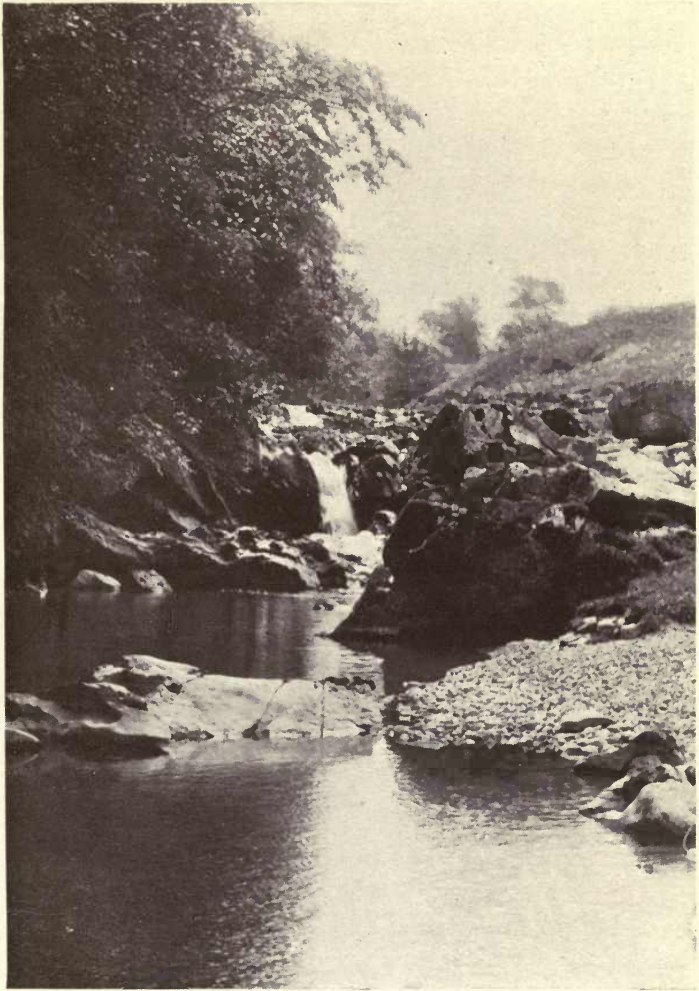
I LOVE my mother's country in the heart of Fell-land with a passion that can never die. Its fresh, cool breezes, grey limestone crags, and chattering becks tumbling over mossy boulders, appeal to me with the same instinctive longing that sends a little bird over a thousand miles of sea and land to the beloved old hedge-row in which it first fluttered its tiny wings and learnt something of the freedom of the air.

Thither let us journey and tarry for a while amongst our feathered friends in their peaceful haunts, far, far away from the hum and turmoil of men.

From one cause or another the wild life of any given district ebbs and flows if it be watched carefully over a series of years. The peewit, or lapwing, used to be one of the commonest birds on the fells a few years ago, but the barbaric fashion of eating the bird and its eggs at the same season has reduced its numbers far below those of the curlew in some districts. This is very regrettable from the bird-lover's point of view, but as the lapwing is one of the farmer's most useful allies in the production of human food there is another and far more serious aspect of the case to be considered.

The upper reaches of the River Eden are rich in bird life. Picture to yourself a few acres of more or less flat





Home of the Dipper and Grey Wagtail



Common Sandpiper on Its Nest

## O'er Fell and Dale

ground—an old-time deposit of the river in mighty flood. It is besprinkled with tufts of rushes and encroaching patches of bracken, with here and there a moss-grown boulder peeping out in forlorn isolation. On either hand it is flanked by steeply rising green hills studded all over with outcrops of grey limestone. Through the middle the river meanders, a mere trickle shining in the sunlight like a snail's silvery trail, wearing away when in spate first one bank and then the other, making excellent breeding-places for innumerable sand martins that skim and twirl over its pools and rippling shallows all the livelong day, and you will be able to visualize the headquarters of the sandpiper and yellow wagtail in the months of May and June.

Two hundred yards farther up-stream the water tumbles through a rocky gorge. Here it is so cabined and confined that it rushes in a white jet down into a rocky funnel fifteen feet deep. In dry weather this giant funnel is never quite full, because the water escapes through a hole in its lower rim and bubbles up in the deep pool below, making it look like the surface of that in a boiling kettle. Of course, in flood time a lot of the stream is spilt over the rim of the funnel, and, meeting the current rushing up from below, creates a great turmoil.

Here you can always find a pair of dippers breeding in perfect safety on the upper edge of a damp, unapproachable slope of overhung rock forming the far side of the funnel, and quite above the high-water mark of anything but an abnormal flood. If you attempted



## At Home with Wild Nature

to swim to it across the pool the chances are you would never be able to scramble up its steep, slippery side, and might be sucked to destruction by the volume of water dragging for ever downwards towards the hole in the lower rim.

A few yards overhead there is a small inaccessible crevice in the face of the limestone cliff. In this the beautiful grey wagtail, with its canary yellow breast and long black tail, has bred from time immemorial.

Fifty yards higher up the gorge is spanned by an old wooden footbridge in the very last stages of decrepitude. Its timbers are so deeply decayed that it would hardly be safe for two people to cross at the same time, lest it should collapse and precipitate them headlong into the unlighted depths of the narrow rock-pool beneath.

A little way below the funnel hole the river meanders over a shingle bank and tumbles into another deep pool crowded with trout of all ages and sizes. In droughty weather you can see them through the six or seven feet of limpid water all lying at rest, like a regiment of soldiers, every head pointing up-stream. In these congregations the small fish are compelled to keep an ever-wary eye on the large ones, because old trout have a disagreeable habit of turning cannibal. I have seen, nay, caught, in the days of my youth, when tickling was not regarded as poaching and trout far more plentiful than in these by-law-bound times, a fish a foot and a half long with another in its mouth so large it could not be swallowed, and had to be digested piecemeal. A hungry, unsophisticated trout will rise at anything he

## O'er Fell and Dale

can swallow. On one occasion I tickled a pounder from beneath the dark recesses of an overhanging bank, and discovered that he had just sucked down an innocent little water shrew as he swam across a pool no wider than the surface of an ordinary-sized dining-table.

Just below this trout pool and before we come to what I christened "bird flat," the left bank of the river rises at an angle approximating that of a church steeple. On this escarpment a sandpiper had made her nest under a tangle of dead bracken. She was at once the boldest and noisiest member of her species I had ever come near, and I coveted her portrait, but the abrupt steepness of the bank forbade photography of any kind, except looking down from the top, or up from the boulder-strewn bed of the river below, points equally impossible on account of their distance from the nest.

There's a way out of most difficulties, however, as the mouse said when the cat lifted him out of the liquor vat, so I borrowed a pick and spade from a neighbouring farmer and dug myself in half-way up the bank and on a level with the nest.

No sooner had I fixed up my apparatus and been covered with the green tent-cloth by my assistant than I heard the sandpiper declaiming in her soft plaintive notes from the bed of the stream below. Peeping through a small hole I espied her hopping from stone to stone calling all the time and working her tail up and down after the manner of her kind. I concluded her mate was close by and that she was calling to him. Not a bit of it, she was talking to herself. She flew from a

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mossy boulder, where she had stood for some time critically inspecting my hide-up, on to the bank, and zigzagging to and fro finally thrust her bill through the dead bracken over her nest and made a considered scrutiny of the lens. This was the only time she refrained from holding a voluble conversation with herself. As the eye of the camera neither winked nor blinked she came right on to her nest, and was recorded sitting there. Even after she had become reconciled to the presence of my hiding-tent and quite settled down to her task of incubation she kept on calling, although no member of her species ever came near or answered her.

A few score yards farther down-stream I found two more sandpipers' nests, one in a steep bank and the other in a tuft of rushes growing on a sandbank thrown up at a point where once the river flowed.

On the limited acres of "bird flat"—which is really an opening at the foot of a narrow valley—we found half a dozen nests of the "yallo wagster"—the dalesman's name for the yellow wagtail—and a similar number belonging to the meadow pipit. There were lapwings, redshanks, snipes, skylarks and wheatears besides, to say nothing of sand martins and an occasional kingfisher flashing like a meteor up or down stream.

In order to show the well-marked individuality to be met with amongst birds of the same species I will relate my experiences at this place. I tried my photographic hand on the owners of two yellow wagtails' nests built within a stone's throw of each other. One was under





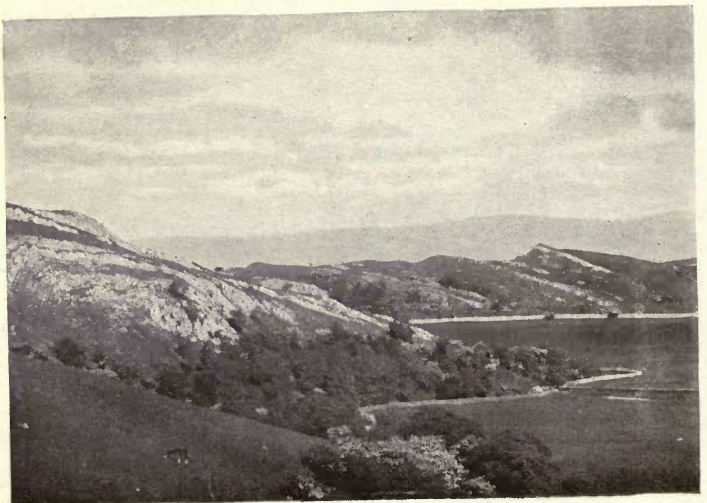
Male Yellow Wagtail on Nest



Fledgeling Yellow Wagtails



Meadow Pipit at Nest



At the Foot of the Fells

## O'er Fell and Dale

the fallen terra-cotta red stalks and fronds of last year's bracken crop, and the other well hidden in a bunch of rushes. In the first, the cock, shown in our illustration (facing page 94), was as bold as brass and could hardly be driven away from home, whereas his mate was shy and showed the greatest reluctance to come near it or my hiding-tent. All she would do was to run round at a respectful distance and tell her mate in loud, clear notes what a brave fellow he was.

These experiences were most radically reversed at the second nest, where the female had all the courage and the male none at all. It may be mentioned, however, that if his mate dallied round too long catching flies or indulging in any other frivolity of a like nature, he was not above trying to bully her into a sense of her duties by attempting to chase her back to the nest.

On the rocky hillside forming the western boundary of our avian paradise the ground is scarred and seamed by the workings of long-forgotten miners in search of lead ore. Concluding the precious metal might be found near the surface at one point these ancient delvers had "hushed" (washed out with a diverted stream of water) the earth and stones away from part of the hillside, leaving a hole at one point twenty to thirty feet deep. On the upper side of this to-day a storm-wracked rowan tree is fighting hard to maintain its precarious existence.

One evening a young shepherd told me he had seen a pigeon fly out of this place the previous day, and imagined it had a nest.



## At Home with Wild Nature

I mentally registered the bird a stock dove, because the species breeds more or less plentifully in holes in the walls of isolated old stone barns in the neighbourhood.

Going that way one day in a climb to the foothills of a peak, where the golden plover breeds, I made a call, and was considerably surprised to see a ring dove or wood pigeon, fly out. She had a nest containing one egg, not in the clustering branches of the mountain ash, however, but on a ledge in the cliff where a ring ouzel might have been expected to build. The nest was made of dead bracken stalks, and is the only instance I have ever known of a wood pigeon building in a cliff. Curiously enough there were plenty of suitable trees available within half a mile of the place.

Birds do reverse things a bit sometimes in their household affairs, however, as I have found a dipper nesting in a tree, and on one occasion a blackbird trying a partridge situation on the ground, far away from a bush of any kind whatsoever.

The illustration facing page 95 shows the foot of a famous bird ghyll in Fell-land, where I have spent many long and happy days with sparrow-hawks, merlins, kestrels, grouse, blackcock, hill partridges, wood pigeons, ring ouzels, missel thrushes, dippers, sandpipers, wood wrens, brown wrens, and other feathered lovers of quiet corners of the earth, far away from the clang and rattle of human activity.

For the best part of a mile the left bank of this ghyll consists of stone-fenced pastures covered with good heather, whilst the right knows nothing but stunted

## O'er Fell and Dale

birch trees, with here and there a thorn or solitary holly thrown in and great slopes covered with coarse bent grass.

Grouse would appear to be changing their habits. The rocky knoll on the left side of our picture forms part of a large grass pasture, or " 'lotment "—as the natives in these parts call a grazing field—carrying a good stock of mares and foals, heifers, and ewes and lambs, yet grouse now come down from the heathery slopes to breed in it in increasing numbers. In 1920 one bird made a nest in it and laid five eggs, but only succeeded in hatching off a single chick on account of the depredations of carrion crows. In 1922 a grouse bred in exactly the same place with better luck, and two others carried off normal broods of seven or eight chicks in this field.

At the foot of the ghyll stands a very lonely old farmhouse on the very ramparts of the inhabitable, in winter time at any rate. One end of the building drops sheer into the noisy beck that drains the ghyll, and just behind there is a rough, boulder-strewn piece of ground half an acre in extent that bears every evidence of having been covered by the waters of the stream in raging flood.

One morning I passed a partridge sitting safe and snug beneath a tuft of dead bracken on this patch of ground, but alas! poor bird, upon returning that way in the evening I was chagrined to discover a few small feathers scattered round and not a single egg left in the nest. She had undoubtedly lost the feathers whilst trying to defend her eggs.

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I had noticed a number of rooks flying round the place as I came down the ghyll and heard them cawing excitedly as they retired to a little clump of birch trees on the hillside, but did not connect them with the theft. A pair of carrion crows, seen and heard a few days previously in the neighbourhood, were blamed for the robbery, although a thorough and widely extended search had failed to discover their nest.

Whilst in the act of looking round to see if I could discover the empty shell of one of the partridge's eggs I stumbled upon the nest of a grouse close beside a sheep track and not twelve yards away from that of the previously mentioned bird. She rose from two eggs, and I could not understand her sitting at that time of day if she were only laying, as her very small clutch appeared to indicate. The circumstances puzzled me until I found the shells of other eggs lying on boulders round about.

On my way home I found a lamb lying dead on the hillside just above the spot where the horse with the white nose and feet is seen grazing in the craggy 'lotment depicted in our illustration, and reported the loss to its owner as I passed his house.

Next morning I called at the isolated farmhouse to see if the old shepherd living in it had come across anything interesting to me in his wanderings. Upon leaving I noticed half a dozen large black birds, which I took to be a family of carrion crows, busily engaged in tearing the body of the dead lamb to pieces. Steadying my field-glasses on the garden wall I discovered they

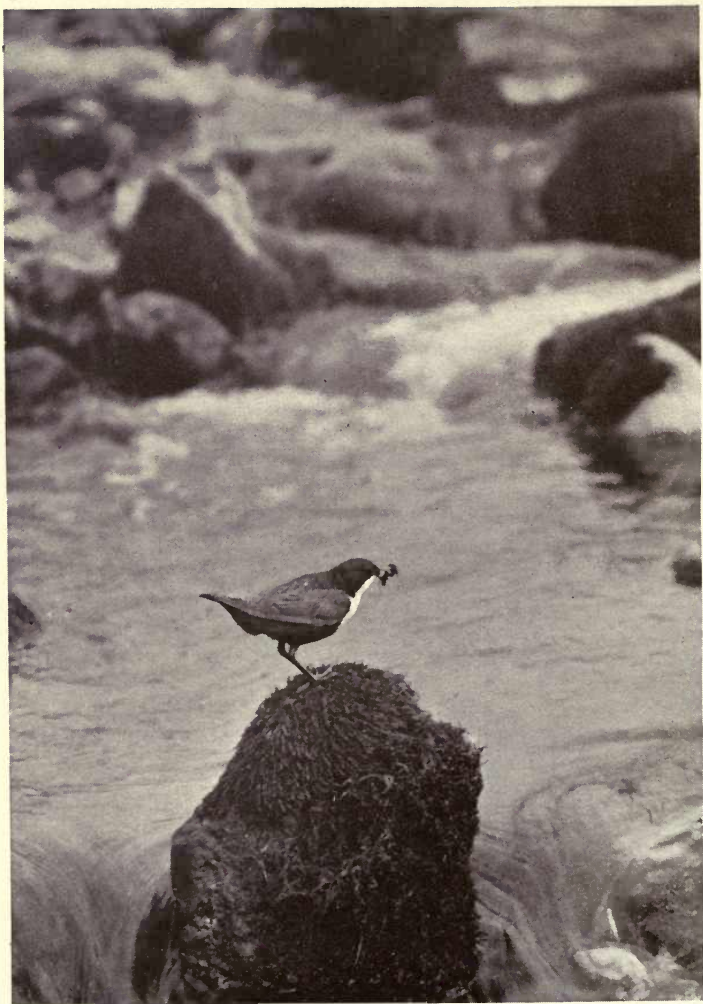




Partridge's Nest



Partridge on Nest



Dipper with Food for Young

## O'er Fell and Dale

were all adult rooks, as the bare patch of grey skin round the base of each black bill clearly indicated! Whether they were very hungry or were merely giving a display of innate savagery I do not know, but their table manners would have shamed those of a pack of wolves.

I found the grouse sitting on her two eggs, and as rook stock had begun a steady decline in my estimation, I determined to try her with my camera. First of all a small pile of leafy branches was erected within a few yards of her nest and left to see what would happen. She took not the slightest notice of this change in the landscape, but straightway returned and sat down in the nest. The wee hiding-tent was then erected and carefully covered all over with greenery. Everything being made shipshape I was duly installed with my cameras, and my assistant took his departure, whilst the bird stood watching him from the top of an adjoining stone wall. No sooner had he disappeared round a bend in the beck than away she came and pitched with a flutter of wings close beside me. In the act of walking as sedately as a barn-door fowl on to her eggs she suddenly caught sight of my lens, and, uttering two or three sharp notes of alarmed protest, flew up the adjoining hillside, and alighting a gunshot off stood perfectly still, with head erect, studying the terrifying eye bound in brass.

Presently my ear caught the hoarse *caw, caw caw*, of a number of rooks. Their voices grew louder and louder as they closed in upon me, until there was an



## At Home with Wild Nature

excited babel going on all round. They had discovered the eggs of the grouse, exposed in order that I might secure a plain view of the bird when she came home, and were going to have them. For a moment or two I could not make up my mind whether to rush out of the tent and scare them away or keep quiet and photograph the robbers *in flagrante delicto*, but finally decided upon the latter course.

Two or three of the bolder spirits in the act of dashing in to secure the prize suddenly caught sight of the fearsome eye of my camera; there was a tremendous flutter of wings, and the whole flock of sable rogues went off as if shot at.

In a little while the grouse walked warily back again, and after passing and repassing amongst the young bracken stalks at the back of the nest, crept quietly on and, without stirring, allowed me to take the photograph forming the frontispiece to the present volume and other pictures.

Once or twice the old cock came home to see how she was getting on, and walked past the nest uttering a short chuckling call I had never before heard a grouse employ.

Upon leaving, my hiding contrivance and everything connected with it was removed out of sight, and the bird's nest carefully hidden by an additional supply of dead brackens. We hung round the place until the rooks had all winged their way back to their roosting quarters, and then left the grouse sitting snugly on her eggs.

Next day I tried her with my moving-picture camera

## O'er Fell and Dale

and think I secured a record that will interest sportsmen and naturalists alike. Upon returning she did not like the look of my lens, so set to work and deliberately raked her eggs out of the nest with her bill and trundled them away into the grass behind the tuft of dead bracken, under which they had been lying. She tried to sit upon them at several different points, but failing to discover a comfortable hollow decided to take them home again. This she successfully accomplished, and I kinematographed her not only taking her eggs out of the nest, but fetching them back again, and finally sitting covering them and looking quite happy over her task.

Again the hiding-tent and everything connected therewith was removed and the grouse's nest thoroughly hidden. I passed that way two days afterwards and was gratified to see her sitting tight and contented. I hope she hatched off successfully and had the good luck to escape a charge of shot during the following season.

Wandering by a mountain becklet one day I stopped to watch a trout lying at the bottom of a pool as clear as crystal, when a dipper rose from beneath an overhanging bank and flew past me. I saw the bird had food in its bill, so turned to watch it. In a flight of less than thirty yards it turned the corner of a landslide and disappeared. Beyond this point the bed of the beck opened out and gave a plain view of the whole ravine. As the dipper had tarried somewhere I followed her, and presently heard some excited notes, which, although piped quite loudly, were difficult to locate. I caught sight of the old bird curtsying after the manner of her

## At Home with Wild Nature

kind on a mossy stone in the middle of the rushing brooklet. When she saw me she sped away up-stream, and I began a painstaking but entirely unavailing search for a nest or—what I rather more expected to find—the scattered members of a newly-fledged family sitting about singly waiting for the next mouthful of aquatic insects brought along by one or other of their parents. Presently my eye caught a white dropping spinning round and round in its gelatinous envelope at a point where the current formed a little eddy. This gave me a clue, and I discovered another and another until I arrived at a little overhanging bank formed by some spate having chiselled a few barrowfuls of virgin earth out of the bank, then I discovered something a wee shade different in colouring and texture from its surroundings. It was the dipper's nest, the roof of which overhung the entrance hole in such a way as entirely to hide it. It contained a family of lusty chicks.

As an illustration of the extreme care with which it was hidden I may mention that a shepherd—a man whom I had known as an excellent bird's-nest finder when a boy—came and stood beside me whilst I was clearing a space in the rough beck bottom for my apparatus, and asked: "What er ye gahn to photograph, Rechard?" "A dipper's nest, Kit," I replied. "But whaar ist?" he queried, although he was within a few feet of it and looking straight at the bank in which it was built.

A dipper's nest, by the way, is a sort of glorified



## O'er Fell and Dale

edition of the home of the common brown wren, a little squatter perhaps, and with a far better hidden front door, especially when you are looking at it on the eye line.

I spent two whole days with that particular water ouzel—as the bird is alternatively called in many districts—and discovered she was mateless, and had to perform all the hard work of foraging for her family of hungry chicks unaided and uncheered. Once or twice a strange member of her species passed up or down stream and was promptly chased away with a great show of anger.

Dippers annex a length of stream by right of conquest, and are the greatest sticklers in the bird world over their territorial rights.

If the shifting of my position on account of the changing direction of the light necessitated keeping her away from the nest for a little while she waited close at hand and frequently dipped the insects she held between her mandibles into the water in order, I imagine, to keep them moist and fresh for her young.

In the short space of two days I converted her from a shy, nervous creature into such a fearless, confiding one that she would come and boldly feed her family whilst I sat and watched her only a few feet away.

Moles are very common on the fells, whither they ascend to breed and spend the summer. I know one plateau, about seventeen hundred feet above ocean level, where mole hills new and old are almost as numerous as pebbles on the seashore.

## At Home with Wild Nature

If this little animal were rare and only found in some remote corner of the earth it would be considered a marvellous quadruped. A whole book, and a very interesting one too, could be written upon it and its wonderful ways.

To begin with, it wears upon its back the toughest and thickest skin for its size of any fur-bearing mammal in the world, and cannot, like many other quadrupeds, and bipeds too for that matter, be rubbed the wrong way. If stroked from head to tail it is all right, and equally so if in the opposite direction, because it is sometimes compelled to run backwards as well as forwards in its dark tunnels, and its fur has been so ingeniously adapted by Nature that it will lie smoothly in either direction.

It possesses an enormous appetite and is compelled to work hard to satisfy it. It has been asserted that a mole can consume its own weight of worms in a day and that it cannot live more than twenty-four hours without nourishment. I am bound to confess from a goodly experience gained by the keeping of many specimens in captivity, that both assertions appear to have some truth in them. Some years ago I kept a mole in an old iron luggage trunk, the bottom of which was covered with such a thin layer of mould that the animal could not get under it, and I could in consequence observe all its actions with ease and certainty. In these circumstances the creature became so tame and confiding that it would feed out of my hand. It possessed such a voracious appetite that the idea



Mole Eating a Large Worm



Short-tailed Field Vole





Dunlin Approaching Her Nest



Dunlin on Nest

## O'er Fell and Dale

occurred to me to feed it to repletion and then discover what would happen. After consuming an enormous number of worms, large and small, and showing very evident inability to swallow more, the animal bit the rest to the point of disablement and stored them all away in a corner of the trunk.

There is a popular belief amongst country people that the bite of a mole is very poisonous. I have been bitten by moles, mice, water voles, short-tailed field voles, rabbits, squirrels, and ferrets in my time, but never suffered the least ill-effect from one of them.

A curious thing about the mole's long snout is that, although so muscular and engaged in such arduous work by its powerful burrowing owner, if flicked by a human finger, as a fly would be flicked off a window-pane, the sharp, slight blow instantly kills the animal. I have seen it done on several occasions by "mouldiwarp"\* catchers in the north.

The mole swims quite well, and does not hesitate to enter any stream that may lie in its path during autumnal or spring migratory journeyings. It possesses prodigious strength. A farmer, who knew a great deal about the creature and its ways from practical experience, once told me that when it is fairly underground, where it can utilize the immense leverage produced by its spade-like forefeet, it can drag along a piece of lead bulk for bulk as large as its own body. By way of testing the strength of the wee beastie a professional

\* In many parts of the north of England the animal is still known by its old Saxon name of mouldiwarp, meaning earth turner.

## At Home with Wild Nature

catcher tied the bodies of seventeen dead moles to that of a live one, and when the creature had buried itself underground it easily dragged its load after it until the bundle of dead specimens reached the mouth of the hole by which the live animal had entered the earth, where, of course, further progress was stopped.

Moles, like shrew mice, often fight desperately savage battles which not infrequently end in the victor making a hearty meal off the body of the vanquished.

You can always distinguish a mole's nesting hillock from one thrown up to get rid of the earth in the construction of a tunnel, because of its greater size. It is a wonderful citadel, constructed on sound principles for a ready escape in case of invasion by an enemy, and with good drainage. I have examined many mouldiwarp's nests in my time, but never found one waterlogged. The actual nest is made of dead grass, fibrous roots, leaves, or any other suitable vegetable material, according to circumstances. The young number from three to seven in a litter, as a rule, but in the summer of 1922 a farmer told me in Fell-land that he had dug two nests up a few weeks previously which contained eight and nine young ones respectively.

You can generally discover from afar the whereabouts of the short-tailed field voles on the fellsides, because the animals have a habit of nibbling the bent grass off close by their holes and runs and it lies dead in conspicuous brown patches.

Whilst resting on a peat bank one hot day in the spring of 1922 I suddenly detected the low, sweet



## O'er Fell and Dale

notes of a dunlin, or, as the shepherds and gamekeepers on the Pennine Range call the bird, a "judcock." For a long series of years I had found a solitary pair of these birds breeding at this very spot, and in less than half an hour watched the female to her nest, containing her full complement of four eggs, under a trailing bunch of dead and dying bent grass.

During the course of one morning that dunlin and I became so well acquainted with each other that I could do anything I wished within reason with her, which resulted in the making of a whole gallery of still and moving pictures.

With the golden plover I was singularly unlucky. Careful watching and equally careful search on what the keepers call "smittle grund," failed to yield any tangible results in the shape of nests or young, although there were plenty of adult birds about, and they were behaving with tantalizing suggestiveness of one or the other near at hand.

A friendly shepherd, however, found a nest for me one morning far below what I would have considered the breeding line of the species, but to my great regret another equally friendly keeper of sheep drove his flock right over it on the evening of the same day, broke two of the beautiful eggs and made the bird forsake!

I love to find the nest of any member of the wader family. As a rule, you can sit down in a land of open spaces and watch your bird from a suspicion-disarming distance and note her every movement. I amused myself by finding the treasure houses of several curlews in

## At Home with Wild Nature

this way, and one day had the good fortune to come upon a particularly bold individual on a heathery slope. She had only three eggs, the fourth having been taken, I found out, by a gentle shepherdess a few days previously.

Whilst kinematographing this bird at an unheard-of close range, on account of the awkward contour of the ground not allowing me to work farther away, she saw something edible in the heather close at hand and thrust her long, curved bill down to secure it, and I pictured her in the act. Just as my supply of film was giving out (interesting things nearly always happen then) she saw something high in the air overhead which greatly excited her curiosity, and she kept turning her head first on one side and then the other in the prettiest manner to gaze at it.

Not far away a cock ring ouzel was piping his lonesome notes from the top of a broken-down stone wall, and I felt sure he had a nest where generations of his forbears had built theirs in a "shak-hole"\* close at hand. Sure enough, there I found it, under a peat bank upon which a trailing beard of heather grew and effectually hid it from view. This bird is extremely heterodox, if one may be allowed to use such a word ornithologically, in regard to a nesting site. I have found it in a hole where a stone had fallen out of an old wall, on a ledge in the face of a little cliff, amongst

\* A funnel-shaped hole in the ground where the earth has been shaken or washed down into some cavity in the limestone rock. Some of these holes are forty or fifty feet in diameter and twenty to thirty in depth.



Curlew on Nest

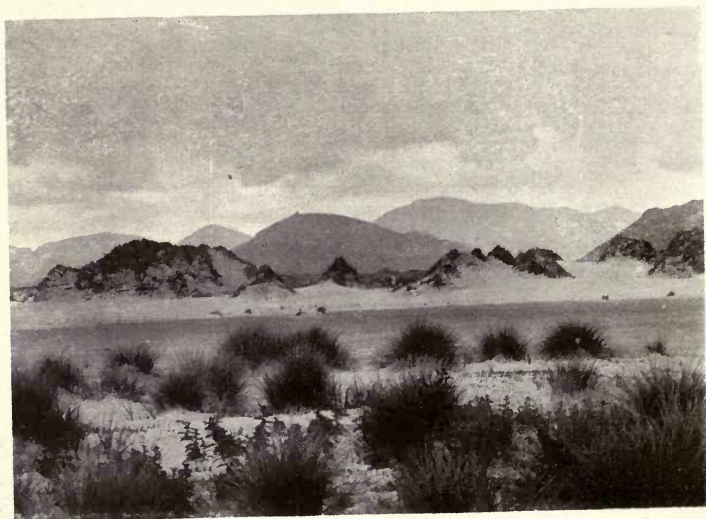


Curlew Walking Away from Her Nest





Oyster Catcher on Her Nest



Sandhills, Cumberland

## O'er Fell and Dale

heather growing on a steep bank, on the ground in a bunch of rushes, in a holly bush, and in a fir tree.

By way of a change, in 1920 my assistant and I left the fells for a few days and journeyed down to Ravenglass, at the mouth of the River Esk, in order to study sea birds at home in their breeding quarters on and around surely the most wonderful sand-dunes in the world. I have seen and worked amongst sand-hills on the Continent and in different parts of this country, but never saw anything to compare with those at Ravenglass. I have tried hard on more than one occasion to record something of their bewitching appeal, but neither my pen nor my camera has proved equal to the task of transfixing their subtle beauty.

After a hurried evening meal at the village inn I made straight for the little whitewashed cottage where my old friend Farren, the aged boatman, lived, right on the estuary. I wanted to know all about the birds in whose welfare we both took such a keen interest. To my bitter regret I found his cosy little home empty and in the last pathetic stages of dissolution. He had departed into the Silences, and the place knew him no more. I looked for the everlasting sweet pea in which the old man took an almost parental interest, as it flowered season by season close to his front door, but alas! it had also vanished. As I leant against the garden wall, thinking and listening to the moaning of the tide far out on the bar, the old fellow's last act of kindness to the birds and to me came to mind, and my heart was filled with a great sorrow.

## At Home with Wild Nature

The following morning I hired a boatman to row us over to the gullery, and we soon beheld a wondrous sight. Black-headed gulls and common terns, or sea swallows, were there in countless and uncomputable numbers. As we advanced white wings flashed in the morning sunshine, north, south, east, west, overhead and everywhere in vision-bewildering wealth; whilst protesting cries over our intrusion filled the air in one distracting clamour. Nests with fresh eggs in and nests containing hard-sat clutches; young ones in down and young ones in feather were everywhere, and care needed to be taken not to tread upon something and crush its life out in this vast nursery. Some of the sand-hills were covered with gulls' nests and the tough marram grass flattened down by the all-day pattering of webbed feet.

The common terns were more scattered than I had found them on a previous visit, and the few pairs of lesser terns that resort to this place every season were, as usual, nesting not far above high-water mark. This bird can be distinguished in the air by its smaller size and the different sound of its sharp call note; on the ground the white patch at the base of the upper mandible is unmistakable evidence.

Noisy oyster catchers were much in evidence, and at one place I found three nests closer together than I had ever known these birds to breed before.

Right amongst the tallest and largest of the sand-dunes we stumbled upon a little colony of Sandwich terns—the largest sea swallows to be found breeding in





Young Black-headed Gull



Black-headed Gull at Nest



Common Tern on Nest



Lesser Tern on Nest

## O'er Fell and Dale

the British Isles. I was anxious to try my photographic hand upon one of the birds. On the shore, some two hundred yards away, we found a huge conical hamper half buried in the sand, so dug it up and utilized it as a hiding contrivance. When inverted there was plenty of room underneath for photographer and apparatus. I cut a round hole through the wickerwork on one side for my lens to look through, and another at the back for signalling purposes, and was duly installed.

The tern came back without the slightest sign of fear or suspicion, and I obtained a beautiful series of pictures of her on and near her handsome pair of eggs. Presently I thrust my pocket handkerchief through the hole in the wickerwork behind me as a signal to my assistant watching proceedings with my binoculars, whilst lying on a distant sand-hill, that I had finished.

We had not taken the moving-picture camera out with us that day, but determined to try the bird with it on the following morning. We did so, but instead of scoring a success, as I had every reason to expect, suffered a bitter disappointment.

The old hamper was moved several feet farther back, as I did not require to portray the bird as large on the film as on my plates, thus increasing the chances of the tern's ready acceptance of things, and I was tucked away by my assistant with a feeling of absolute certainty of coming success. Alas! as Bobby Burns puts it: "The best-laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft agley." My bird had a neighbour only two or three



## At Home with Wild Nature

feet away that had just hatched out two chicks, and she deliberately went off and took charge of one, whilst the mother looked after the other, and everybody was happy but the photographer.

In this odd manner my chances were utterly defeated.

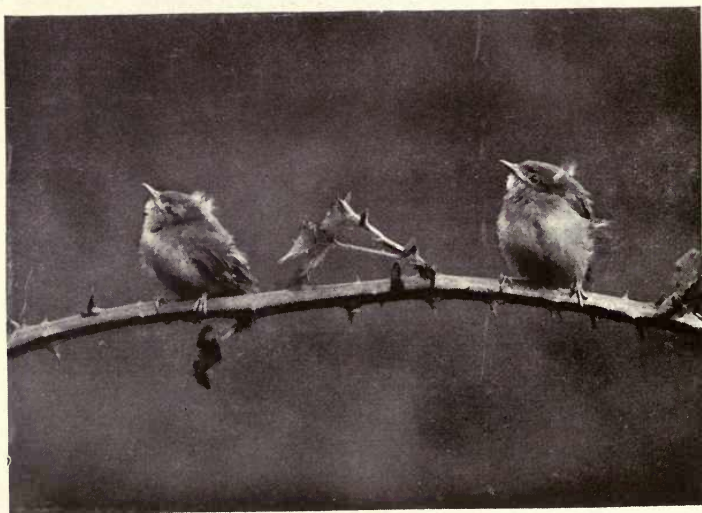
It will be noticed in the illustration that the bird is fast losing her black breeding hood. Some ornithologists are of opinion that she is reverting to her winter plumage at an early date (June 23), whilst others think she is a very old bird.



Sandwich Tern at Nest



Willow Wren at Nest



Fledgeling Willow Wrens



## CHAPTER VII

### WILD LIFE ON A SURREY MOOR

**I** THINK I can say without boasting that I am as well acquainted with the wild life to be found on a certain Surrey moor as I am with that of the one upon which I was born and lived every day, until I was twenty years of age, in the least factory-grimed part of Yorkshire.

For purposes of comparison I have compiled rough lists of the wild birds and beasties to be found on and in the neighbourhood of each. Although differing considerably in geographical situation—for a small country—and elevation, it will be noticed that there is a wonderful similarity in the furred and feathered life of each, the southern moor having, as might be expected, an advantage in point of the number of species.

#### BIRDS OF A SURREY MOOR

- 1.
2. Carrion Crow
3. Rook
4. Jackdaw
5. Magpie
6. Jay
7. Starling
8. Hawfinch
9. Goldfinch
10. Greenfinch
- \*11. Siskin

#### BIRDS OF A YORKSHIRE MOOR

1. Raven
2. Carrion Crow
3. Rook
4. Jackdaw
5. Magpie
- 6.
7. Starling
- 8.
9. Goldfinch
- 10.
- 11.

# At Home with Wild Nature

## BIRDS OF A SURREY MOOR

12. House Sparrow
13. Chaffinch
14. Linnet
15. Lesser Redpoll
- 16.
17. Bullfinch
18. Crossbill
- 19.
20. Yellow-hammer
21. Cirl Bunting
22. Reed Bunting
- 23.
- 24.
25. Skylark
26. Woodlark
27. Pied Wagtail
28. Grey Wagtail
29. Yellow Wagtail
30. Tree Pipit
31. Meadow Pipit
32. Tree Creeper
33. Nuthatch
34. Goldcrest
35. Great Tit
36. Blue Tit
37. Cole Tit
38. Marsh Tit
39. Long-tailed Tit
40. Red-backed Shrike
41. Common Whitethroat
42. Lesser Whitethroat
43. Garden Warbler
44. Blackcap Warbler
45. Dartford Warbler
46. Grasshopper Warbler

## BIRDS OF A YORKSHIRE MOOR

12. House Sparrow
13. Chaffinch
14. Linnet
- 15.
- \*16. Twite
17. Bullfinch
- 18.
19. Corn Bunting
20. Yellow-hammer
- 21.
- 22.
- \*23. Snow Bunting
- \*24. Brambling
25. Skylark
- 26.
27. Pied Wagtail
28. Grey Wagtail
29. Yellow Wagtail
30. Tree Pipit
31. Meadow Pipit
32. Tree Creeper
- 33.
- 34.
35. Great Tit
36. Blue Tit
- 37.
- 38.
- 39.
- 40.
- 41.
- 42.
43. Garden Warbler
- 44.
- 45.
- 46.

# Wild Life on a Surrey Moor

## BIRDS OF A SURREY MOOR

47. Sedge Warbler
48. Willow Warbler
49. Wood Warbler
50. Chiffchaff
51. Missel Thrush
52. Song Thrush
- \*53. Redwing
- \*54. Fieldfare
55. Blackbird
- 56.
57. Redstart
58. Robin
59. Nightingale
60. Stonechat
61. Whinchat
62. Wheatear
63. Hedge Sparrow
- 64.
65. Common Brown Wren
66. Spotted Flycatcher
67. Swallow
68. House Martin
69. Sand Martin
70. Great Spotted Wood-  
pecker
71. Green Woodpecker
72. Wryneck
73. Cuckoo
74. Swift
75. Nightjar
76. Kingfisher
77. Barn Owl
78. Long-eared Owl
79. Brown or Tawny Owl
80. Little Owl

## BIRDS OF A YORKSHIRE MOOR

- 47.
48. Willow Warbler
49. Wood Warbler
- 50.
51. Missel Thrush
52. Song Thrush
- \*53. Redwing
- \*54. Fieldfare
55. Blackbird
56. Ring Ouzel
57. Redstart
58. Robin
- 59.
- 60.
61. Whinchat
62. Wheatear
63. Hedge Sparrow
64. Dipper
65. Common Brown Wren
66. Spotted Flycatcher
67. Swallow
68. House Martin
69. Sand Martin
- 70.
- 71.
- 72.
73. Cuckoo
74. Swift
- \*75. Nightjar
76. Kingfisher
- 77.
- 78.
79. Brown or Tawny Owl
- 80.



# At Home with Wild Nature

## BIRDS OF A SURREY MOOR

81. Montagu's Harrier
- 82.
83. Sparrow-hawk
- 34.
35. Hobby
- 86.
87. Kestrel
38. Wild Duck
89. Teal
90. Heron
- \*91. Woodcock
92. Common Snipe
- \*93. Jack Snipe
- \*94. Dunlin
95. Redshank
- \*96. Common Sandpiper
97. Curlew
- 98.
99. Ringed Plover
100. Lapwing or Peewit
- \*101. Common Gull
- \*102. Herring Gull
- \*103. Lesser Black-backed Gull
- \*104.
- \*105. Black-headed Gull
106. Great Crested Grebe
107. Dabchick or Little Grebe
- 108.
109. Moorhen
110. Coot
111. Stock Dove
112. Ring Dove
113. Turtle Dove

## BIRDS OF A YORKSHIRE MOOR

- 81.
- \*82. Buzzard
83. Sparrow-hawk
84. Peregrine Falcon
- 85.
86. Merlin
87. Kestrel
88. Wild Duck
89. Teal
90. Heron
- \*91. Woodcock
92. Common Snipe
- 93.
94. Dunlin
95. Redshank
96. Common Sandpiper
97. Curlew
98. Golden Plover
- 99.
100. Lapwing or Peewit
- \*101. Common Gull
- \*102. Herring Gull
- \*103. Lesser Black - backed Gull
- \*104. Great Black - backed Gull
105. Black-headed Gull
- 106.
- 107.
108. Corncrake or Landrail
109. Moorhen
- 110.
111. Stock Dove
112. Ring Dove
- 113.



Long-tailed Tit at Nest



Common Whitethroat Feeding Her Chicks



# Wild Life on a Surrey Moor

## BIRDS OF A SURREY MOOR

114. Pheasant
115. Red-legged Partridge
116. Common Partridge
- 117.
- 118.

## BIRDS OF A YORKSHIRE MOOR

114. Pheasant
- 115.
116. Common Partridge
117. Black Grouse
118. Red Grouse

Non-breeding birds are marked with an asterisk.

In these lists it will be observed I have not taken note of several members of the duck and tern families which visit tarns and ponds on both moors in the spring, autumn and winter. Neither have I mentioned such stray wanderers to the Yorkshire district as Arctic skua nor black-throated diver which I have seen in Surrey.

## MAMMALS

- |                              |                              |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Fox                       | 1. Fox                       |
| 2. Hare                      | 2. Hare                      |
| 3. Rabbit                    | 3. Rabbit                    |
| 4. Hedgehog                  | 4. Hedgehog                  |
| 5. Mole                      | 5. Mole                      |
| 6. Common Rat                | 6. Common Rat                |
| 7. Water Vole                | 7. Water Vole                |
| 8. Otter                     | 8. Otter                     |
| 9. Common Mouse              | 9. Common Mouse              |
| 10. Long-tailed Field Mouse  | 10. Long-tailed Field Mouse  |
| 11. Short-tailed Field Vole  | 11. Short-tailed Field Vole  |
| 12. Shrew                    | 12. Shrew                    |
| 13. Squirrel                 | 13. Squirrel                 |
| 14. Dormouse                 | 14.                          |
| 15. Stoat                    | 15. Stoat                    |
| 16. Weasel                   | 16. Weasel                   |
| 17.                          | 17. Fomart or Pole Cat       |
| 18. Pipistrelle Bat          | 18. Pipistrelle Bat          |
| 19. Larger Bats Unidentified | 19. Larger Bats Unidentified |

## At Home with Wild Nature

The mammals would appear to have been more evenly shared out than the members of the avian tribes. The excess of the latter in Surrey is no doubt accounted for by the well-wooded character of the country round the moor. Of reptiles I have made no notes, but these are undoubtedly far more numerous and of greater variety in the southern county than in the northern.

I have visited the Surrey moor, with which this chapter deals, off and on, for a long series of years. Like its fellow-wilderness in my native county it consists of a series of commons, the boundaries of which are, luckily in both cases, still unmarked by such modern abominations as barbed wire and galvanized iron.

Let the reader picture to himself, or herself, a stretch of moorland six to eight miles in areal extent consisting of sandy furze-clad hills of no great height or steepness; long carpet-like stretches of heather growing from a thin layer of peat that lies on a deposit of silver sand as hard as a rock; acres and acres of shallow bog, white in places with the waving blossoms of cotton grass and yellow in others with patches of sphagnum moss clustering round still, dark pools; here and there a fast silting-up pond, still beloved of coot and moorhen, sends music into the air from the dead wind-swept reed stems standing up gaunt and stark over three parts of its surface; now and then you come upon a silent trickle of water shimmering in the sun, but never a bubbling spring or prattling beck; bright green patches of birch, battling for a footing wherever the ground is dry enough, are to be seen here and there; dark pine

## Wild Life on a Surrey Moor

woods, heaped up mass on mass, form the background, and lastly, numerous pathetic evidences in the shape of ancient, long since crumbled turf walls, and silted-up dykes, of man's aggressive but happily unsuccessful onslaughts upon this bit of God's wilderness, and he, or she, will be able to conjure up, I hope, a fair picture of my little corner of Surrey.

Let us make the acquaintance of some of the feathered folks living, loving, and labouring on the moor. It is a fine May morning. The rich scent of the pine trees fills the air, and the little pools of water by the roadside are covered with their yellow pollen dust, just as if a bag of brimstone had been shaken over them. A sandy side track, leading nowhere in particular, shoots us out, with agreeable suddenness, on to heathery, breeze-kissed spaces.

Ah! there's a familiar note. A common whitethroat scolding over my intrusion. I stand still, and presently he forgets his resentment, and, mounting twenty or thirty feet into the air, descends again on outspread wings and tail, every hurried note and action proving that his little heart is bubbling over with the joys of being. Down he comes singing all the way to the top-most spray of a furze bush, which is one golden blaze of richly scented bloom. He has a nest and sitting mate close at hand. A little search reveals the frail cradle of dead grass stems and horse-hair with five eggs in it. Whilst the wee home is being examined the old birds skulk in a tangled patch of furze and heather close by and scold me roundly in their characteristically



## At Home with Wild Nature

harsh *cha, cha purr purr* notes. However, we became better acquainted later on when I was allowed to photograph them and their fledgelings without a note of murmur.

A hundred yards farther on and I am right amongst good, healthy, young heather, such as many a sportsman would love to see growing on his grouse moor, with here and there a blood-red root of sundew, or Venus's fly-trap, growing in its midst. The translucent drops of glutinous matter by which this carnivorous plant entangles its victims gleam in the morning sunshine like stars.

Dragon flies of every size and hue dance wantonly hither and thither, alighting to rest ever and anon upon some broken reed stem trailing by the side of a little stream, so sluggish that it is difficult for the stranger to tell which way it is flowing, or whether it is flowing at all, until something that will float is thrown on to its surface and watched.

This is a favourite haunt of the cuckoo. I have seen as many as five on the wing together hereabouts chasing each other, one "a-crying and a-flying," another—a hen, of course—uttering her bubbling notes, and the others too intent upon business to utter a sound. There are two old fir stumps standing dead and grey some three feet above the vast carpet of brown heather away to my left. They form favourite alighting stations for cuckoos, hawks, and other birds. No sooner has one wayfarer rested, looked round, and departed than another takes its place. Droppings lying thick on their



Young Cuckoo



Male Reed Bunting at Nest



## Wild Life on a Surrey Moor

tops and streaking down their sides like whitewash, testify to the popularity of these stumps as resting-places and look-out stations over the wide expanse of featureless heather around them. At the moment there is a cock meadow pipit on the top of one of them uneasily watching my movements and expressing alarm to his mate sitting on five dusky brown eggs under a tussock not a hundred yards away. His soft *trit, trit, trit, tritting* notes and rather woeful attitude, as seen through my binoculars, would have given his secret away readily enough, even if I had not already known it.

Away down to my right millions of snowy-white cotton-grass blossoms sway gently in the wind. Their long, slender stems enable them to nod their fluffy heads to the lightest breath of air, consequently they are for ever in motion. Beyond the stretch of bogland in which they grow is a piece of ground rising a few feet above the surrounding marsh. Such of the neighbouring rustics as possess enough energy to ramble thus far from the village in search of firewood or fresh air, by courtesy call it "the island." Taking off my boots and socks I wade through the bog and sit down on a decaying tree-trunk to dry my feet and don my footgear again.

Ah! there's a cock reed bunting swaying on one of a handful of dead reed stems by the water's edge. He is easily identified by his black bowler hat and wide white collar, to say nothing of his three rather wearisomely reiterated notes that sound exactly like—*don't-hit-me*.

## At Home with Wild Nature

Presently he flies away down wind and reappears with a brilliantly green caterpillar in his bill, which argues a sitting mate, or, more probably still, a nest containing young ones. Moving a little nearer the marsh I sit quietly down to watch him. Yes, the whole science of observing wild birds, and beasties too, lies in keeping perfect stillness, death-like silence, and watching everything out of the tail of your eye, as it were. There is nothing wild creatures dislike half so much as the direct stare of the human eye, except perhaps the steady glower of the lens of a camera.

All is quiet save for the noisy yelping of a redshank, disturbed by a wandering botanist gathering specimens where the bog tails off into land dry enough to be examined in a pair of good boots, half a mile away. The reed bunting pays no heed to either man or bird, they are both too far off for consideration, but flying from a diminutive birch tree to a dead pine and back again uneasily several times, circles round me, alights on the little bunch of reeds by the marsh for a final survey, and then drops out of sight. His nest, containing a family of five lusty chicks, is easily located. This bird proved to be not only a devoted father, but a dutiful husband. If his mate turned lens-shy or remained away from home for any length of time, he always showed the most wonderful solicitation for the welfare of his offspring, hopping round the nest and finally sitting down to cover the chicks and keep them warm.

Walking over the crown of "the island," which supports a moderate growth of pines and birches of all

## Wild Life on a Surrey Moor

ages intermixed with clumps of old furze and very long heather, I was startled to hear the clear ringing notes of a curlew. The bird had risen from a piece of comparatively flat ground overgrown with masses of half-dead bent grass, rushes, and other coarse herbage—typical breeding surroundings of her species. She flew away with protesting cries, and to my astonishment alighted on the topmost twig of a dead tree, standing gaunt and lonely on the other side of the snow field of cotton grass, where she stood outlined against the sky like an ibis.

Her subsequent behaviour persuaded me that she had a nest and eggs somewhere on “the island,” although it was within forty-five miles of London town, and according to all previous experience she ought at the moment to have been breeding on a northern fell-side.

Retracing my footsteps I made a detour and went into hiding at a point commanding a good view of the ground, yet several hundred yards away. Whilst quietly scanning the country through my binoculars I was suddenly startled by a great commotion and clatter of wings. A teal duck rose from a tangle of heather beside a thick furze bush and flew away. There she had sat in her downy cradle upon nine eggs for several minutes within a few feet of me, and would have sat on undiscovered had her nerve not failed and the instinct of self-preservation told her in undeniable terms to seek safety in flight. Poor bird, she need not have troubled, for her eggs and she were both quite safe.



## At Home with Wild Nature

I folded the luxuriant masses of down over the eggs to keep them warm, and fell to watching the curlew. Members of this species are far too wise to return to their nests by any direct route. My bird was no exception to this rule. Descending from her coign of vantage on the dead tree-top she flew round once or twice looking for me, and then alighted on the edge of the marsh at the lower end of the island and disappeared. In a few moments my field-glasses picked her up again, wandering to and fro in the most leisurely manner, feeding as she advanced, but always travelling in the direction of the spot from which she had originally risen. Frequently she disappeared altogether behind a tussock of bent grass, or was swallowed up by a declivity in the ground, only to come into view again several yards farther on, advancing steadily towards her goal. Finally, she vanished as completely as if the ground had opened and swallowed her up.

Making a careful survey of the ground lying between us and memorizing its landmarks, so plain through the field-glasses and obscure to the naked eye, I started forward, keeping a large tree behind me and the dead one on the farther side of the marsh in line. Stumbling over little hillocks and floundering into hollows progress is slow, but a never-wavering eye must be kept on the ground where the wily bird finally disappeared. One hundred yards have been covered, and then two hundred, but never a sign or a sound is vouchsafed me. Hope gives place to doubt. A thousand disappointments have made me incapable of feeling any depressing



Female Cirl Bunting



Male Cirl Bunting



Redshank on Nest



Young Redshanks in the Nest



## Wild Life on a Surrey Moor

emotions. So on I go. Another hundred and fifty yards of ground have been covered, when the curlew rises in a great flutter, almost at my feet, and takes her departure in silence.

There is her spacious nest containing its full complement of four beautiful olive-green eggs, blotched and spotted with dark brown—in the county of Surrey and within such easy reach of London town too!

Further investigation led to the discovery of two more pairs of these silver-tongued birds breeding on the moor, and the music they made reminded me of many a fellside ramble in the north.

The wary redshank is not an easy bird to watch to its nest, which is generally well hidden in some thick tuft of grass. Occasionally one is stumbled upon by accident, when the bird goes off in a great flutter from beneath the very feet of the wayfarer.

Passing through a fringe of crow-haunted conifers growing upon an ancient landslide that had thrust its way into a long choked-up mere, I came out upon the sourest flat of all the moor, from a vegetation point of view. Here was unmistakable evidence of the hand of the hardy squatter who centuries ago bent his body and his will to the task of grinding an existence out of the very face of niggardly old Dame Nature. What god-like courage these forbears of ours showed when they built their hovels in the wilderness and settled down to a lifelong fight with poverty! In every direction the shallow deposit of peat had been cut out and taken away, either for fuel or thatch, probably both.

## At Home with Wild Nature

On a little mound of earth left at its original elevation in one of these ancient turf pits, or "peat pots," as we call them in Yorkshire, where the deposit sometimes measures eight or ten feet instead of the same number of inches on our Surrey moor, a redshank had made her nest. It contained four of the most beautifully marked eggs ever laid by any bird of her kind, I think.

Fixing up my hiding-tent a few yards distant and covering it with heather stalks, birch twigs and rushes, I walked away in order to allow the yelping mother bird to become familiar with its appearance. Surely a nesting redshank is the noisiest bird that flies! In Essex the rustics call it "the tuke," because of the sound of its alarm cry, which is very loud and oft-repeated. Where a number of redshanks nest in proximity and the countryside lends itself to echoes, the din they make, if endured for half an hour on end, becomes perfectly distracting.

In a little while my redshank ceased to call *tuke*, *tuke*, *tuke*, and, talking to herself in an undertone, sidled round the hide-up and finally settled down upon her nest. Like the curlew this bird made great use of tree-tops as look-out stations.

A few hours later I was duly tucked up with my moving-picture camera in the hiding-tent, by a friend who afterwards walked ostentatiously away. This ruse completely deceived the redshank, and she returned in something of a hurry for a member of her species. Then, catching sight of my lens staring at her nest from beneath a heavy eyebrow of heather, she jumped into

## Wild Life on a Surrey Moor

the air as if someone had shot at her, and went off with loud cries of protest, in which her ever-watchful mate readily and loudly joined.

As nothing stirred or sounded she ventured back again, zigzagging to and fro behind the nest, getting closer and closer until at last she warily thrust her head into the tussock of heather concealing it and stopped to listen. Nothing happening to upset her equanimity she deftly stepped into the nest, hustled the eggs into the warmest positions beneath her body, and settled quietly down to the work of incubation. As she had her back towards me the white star on her rump, a characteristic mark of her species, could plainly be seen.

I started to turn the handle of my camera very slowly, but, in spite of the fact that its mechanism is muffled like the door-knocker of a house of sickness, she heard it, and springing up went off in the flash of a thought. In fact, such was the hurry of her departure that she dragged one egg out of the nest, and it rolled a foot or more away. I was very curious to know what would happen to this egg when its owner returned.

After a little delay and a great deal of loud protest she calmed down again and came back to the nest. She did not observe the lonesome extruded egg at first, but eventually catching sight of it she deliberately walked out of the nest, and I kinematographed her in the act of raking it home again with her bill, and finally sitting down to cover it and the rest of the clutch!

On my way home I sat down on a crumbling turf wall, dug from a ditch at my feet by long-vanished



## At Home with Wild Nature

hands, in order to take a little rest, and incidentally watch a pair of hobbies swooping and twirling over a reed bed. They were catching their usual evening meal of dragon flies, large and small. These birds frequently, but not always, seize their winged prey with their feet and dexterously transfer dragon fly, moth or beetle from claw to beak in mid-air!

Whilst I sat there a snipe began to mount the darkening western sky with a sharp *ajik, ajik, ajik*. Having reached a suitable elevation he altered his course and began to slope obliquely downwards with outspread tail, and made the heavens hum with his drumming. Presently his mate appeared from nowhere, so to speak, and in silence pitched amongst some rushes half a hundred paces in front of me. She had just returned from her supper in the bogland and was sitting on four chipped eggs.

## CHAPTER VIII

### WILD LIFE ON A SURREY MOOR (*Continued*)

THE dragon fly has been rightly named from a popular point of view. He is a monster. Whilst eating my lunch one day on an improvised seat of heather stalks, with my back resting against the shady side of a tree, along came a gaily coloured dragon fly and pitched upon the stalk of a trailing frond of furze not ten inches from my face. It was a member of a small species and did not measure more than an inch in length, with a body ringed in bright blue and white. To my horror I discovered it was in the act of shearing the wings and legs off a live fly almost half its own length. A sudden movement on my part, made with the idea of saving the unfortunate victim, only ended in the murderer skimming away like a flash with his prey still tightly gripped between his cruel jaws.

Nemesis sometimes overtakes these bold marauders, however, for if they happen to forget themselves so far as to alight upon the sticky leaves of a Venus's fly-trap the chances are that they remain there and are slowly digested by the plant. In my wanderings I have come upon several individuals, large and small, thus entangled and inevitably doomed to a lingering death.

Both the stonechat and the whinchat love wide, un-

## At Home with Wild Nature

crowded spaces. As a rule, however, the former chooses higher and drier ground than the latter.

Basking one day on a peat bank, like a sand lizard enjoying the lovely summer sunshine, and admiring the peaceful, spacious view in front of me, my ear suddenly caught the low sweet notes of a cock whinchat perched on a tree-top fifty paces off. We were in full view of each other, but as I was still and silent he did not appear to mind me or my field-glasses.

Presently his mate spoke in decisive notes, sounding something like *u-tack, u-tack, u-tack*, and flying from the top of a live baby pine rearing its tender head a foot or two above the surrounding heather, to that of a dead one killed and charred black on the outermost fringe of last year's heath fire, thence to a neighbouring furze bush and back again without resting, told me plainly she had a nest near at hand. In less than half an hour she dropped quietly into the heather and spoke no more.

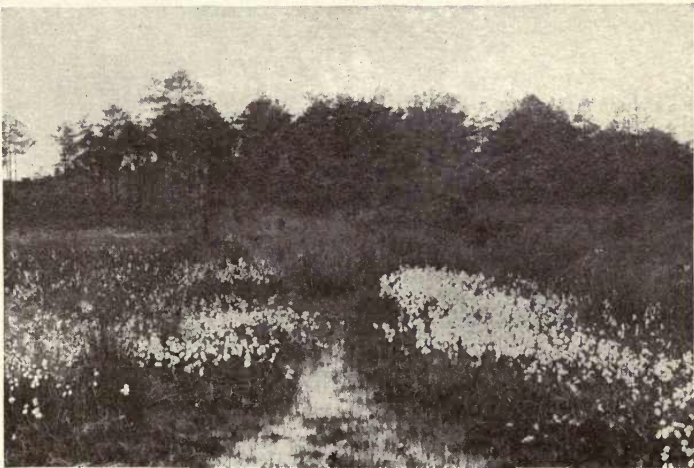
Making careful mental notes of the landmarks lying between us, I followed them up and flushed her from a particularly well-hidden nest containing six beautiful greenish-blue eggs, slightly spotted on the larger end with rusty brown. In order to show how thoroughly she had concealed her home I fixed my camera up and took two photographs exactly four feet away from the eggs, one before a blade of grass or sprig of ling had been touched and the other with the nest exposed.

A week later the cock had ceased to sing, and was helping his mate to find small, green caterpillars and moths for their hungry offspring. As the long laborious

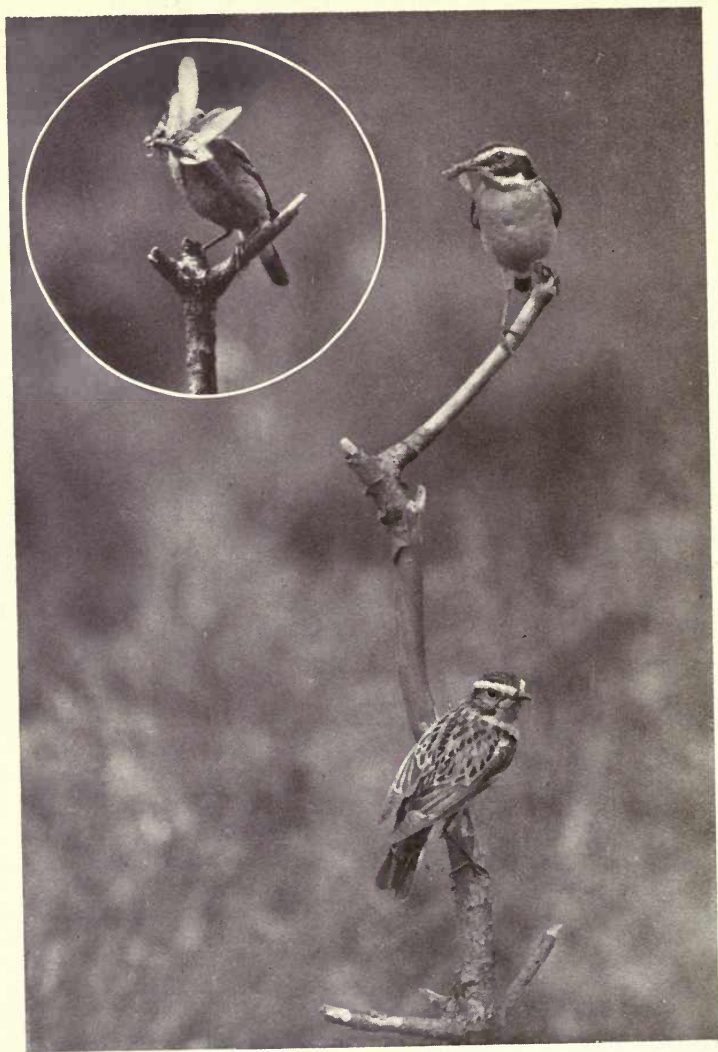




Dragon Fly in a Venus's Flytrap



Cotton Grass on a Surrey Moor



Whinchats at Home

## Wild Life on a Surrey Moor

days went by the appetites of the chicks appeared to increase in exact ratio to their size. Not so the good qualities of their father, however. His interest and industry waned at the same time, and he spent longer and longer periods away from the nest, leaving his mate to work like a galley slave in order to feed their sons and daughters.

Luckily dragon flies of many different species were plentiful in the immediate neighbourhood, and she would occasionally return home with such a splendid collection in her bill that their wings made it appear as if she were wearing the wonderful creation of some Parisian milliner on her head. How she was able to see her way about in safety it is difficult to imagine. Nevertheless, she managed to do so. Occasionally a large specimen of the fat-bodied variety of dragon fly was brought along with its wings shorn off and "all ready for the table." These preparations were not always remembered, however, and if the lucky recipient—a case of first come first served, energy and enterprise always rewarded—had any difficulty in swallowing the prize its mother generally helped with a friendly thrust of her bill.

The stonechat has a habit of perching on the topmost branch of a furze or other bush, and whilst he surveys his surroundings uttering a note which sounds something like *u-tic, u-tic*. This call note may be easily and successfully imitated by tapping two pebbles the size of a thrush's egg smartly together.

If you would learn what a quick luncheon means find



## At Home with Wild Nature

a stonechat's nest with chicks in it and try your hand at photographing the old cock delivering his catch of moths. He will astonish you, even if you have visited the United States of America and snatched your midday meal in Broadway, New York, every day for a twelve-month.

Wandering one hot afternoon from a lonesome valley of small ponds and marshland, where the wild duck, curlew, peewit and snipe all breed, my wife and I sat down on a sandy hilltop to rest and watch the cunning antics of a pair of wheatears anxious to prevent us from discovering the whereabouts of their nest in a rabbit's old breeding "stop." Suddenly we were galvanized into action by the silvery cadences of a wood-lark's song trickling down from the ethereal blue far, far overhead. Although a mere speck my field-glasses revealed him climbing heavenwards in wide circles as he drifted slowly down wind towards a birch wood.

We followed in his direction, but never another sign or sound was vouchsafed unto us. A week later, however, we renewed our search and were rewarded. There we beheld him standing right on the top of an old oak growing in the birch wood, uttering his low, sweet, soothing call notes. He was waiting for his mate. Presently she joined him, and away they flew down wind, side by side like a pair of carriage horses, straight over a belt of timber and disappeared in the dim and misty distance as if bent upon leaving the county altogether.

In less than half an hour they returned with the



Whinchat's Nesting Site



Whinchat's Nest Exposed



Male Stonechat



## Wild Life on a Surrey Moor

stealth of shadows, for although I had chosen a point commanding a clear view of the little birch wood and its surroundings, the first intimation I had of their presence was call and answer from neighbouring tree-tops. My binoculars revealed the fact that each bird held food in its bill. Both descended to the thick carpet of heather growing between the birch trees and vanished, to rise again in a little while, empty billed, twenty yards apart. I said to myself, "fledged young ones scattered about in the undergrowth," but subsequent events falsified this verdict.

Again and again they came with food, but never alighted or rose from the same place twice in succession. I shifted my observation point a dozen times and made the most painstaking search, but all in vain. Here was the finest example of supercraft in the feathered world that had ever come within my ken.

It took me two whole days of waiting and watching before the woodlarks' nest was discovered with a family of well-grown chicks in it. Of course, it was very cunningly hidden, but so is the nest of the blue throat, and I had found that in the wilds of western Europe. What puzzled and misled me was the practice the birds made of alighting fifteen or twenty yards away and running through the undergrowth to their home, and adopting similar tactics upon leaving it.

After exposing two or three plates in the waning light of a far-spent day upon the woodlarks at the nest, we cached the camera under a peat bank and began our long homeward tramp.

## At Home with Wild Nature

A hundred yards had not been covered when my ear caught a faint querulous *cheep, cheep, cheep* coming from the rough old heather we had just waded knee-deep through on the hillside. Leaving my wife on the mossy track we had just reached, I reclinced the hill, stopping ever and anon to listen and pick up the guiding notes again. Luckily my advance was being made with caution, for before I realized it I stumbled upon a hen pheasant sitting brooding a family of chicks, two or three of which peeped out of their mother's breast plumage to take an inquiring look at me.

Withdrawing from the scene slowly and quietly I recovered the camera from its hiding-place and faced a difficulty of haunting fear. Would there be enough light of day left wherewith to focus and expose my plates? The bird gave no trouble whatsoever, for she sat like a rock, although the contour of the ground compelled me to use my fearsome apparatus within three or four feet of her. My focus was guesswork, for although I moved the millhead of my lens back and forth a dozen times I could not make up my mind when the pheasant was sharp on the ground glass. Stop f22 was placed on the lens, and one of the fastest plates made in this or any other country given an exposure of seven seconds! The result shown in the illustration facing page 136 was, of course, a happy accident.

The bird never once stirred except in response to the hustling of the chicks beneath her, and I left her in peace, to re-hide the camera and join my wife on the old-world track below.

## Wild Life on a Surrey Moor

The beautiful yellow wagtail, or "cowbird," as the rustics call it in many parts of the country, breeds in varying numbers every year on one or other of the commons embraced in our Surrey moor. Its clear ringing call notes easily established its identity and remind me forcibly of many a beloved north country dale.

Beyond the woodlarks' home in the patch of birch snuggles a small alder-fringed pond, surely the most densely populated sheet of water for its size in all England! Sitting on its eastern bank you can see heathery knolls peeping out between the tree-tops, suggestive miniatures of the Cumberland fells or Highland mountain crests round Dalwhinnie.

Here coots, moorhens and dabchicks are in plenty. All day long you can hear their discordant voices lifted up in protest against some territorial encroachment, and not infrequently the splashing of waters as a bitter fight proceeds. Watching a contest between two angry cock dabchicks suggests a couple of hostile submarines fighting without guns or torpedoes.

Any wild duck that has managed to hide her nest from the lynx-eyed, instinct-guided descendants of the original squatters in the neighbourhood is sure to bring her ducklings down to this pond as soon as they are able to travel over the rough moor. Here they can disport themselves in their natural element and enjoy a large measure of safety from prowling fox and galloping stoat.

Our little pond possesses one unfortunate drawback for the too inquisitive naturalist bent upon exploring its



## At Home with Wild Nature

reed-hidden secrets. It is the home of numberless repulsive leeches ! One hot day I stood knee-deep in it, behind a leafy screen, watching a mother dabchick giving her family of dusky babies their first lesson in watercraft, and upon returning to dry land to don my socks and boots discovered a much-inflated leech working overtime on the calf of my leg. There was neither pain nor irritation attending his efforts, so far as I was concerned, but besides enjoying a good meal he opened a vein that flowed freely for two hours. Do what I would I could not stop it. I imagine he had ejected something into the puncture from his chemical factory that prevented the blood from congealing. At any rate, scientists tell me that the leech uses a preservative, which acts upon the blood he imbibes like boracic acid on milk ; it keeps it fresh and flowing until it is required for digestive purposes.

Amongst the trees in the hinterland of the eastern shores of our sequestered pool wood ants live in vast numbers. I was waiting one day for the westerning sun to help me to kinematograph some of their barbarities towards inadvertent spiders, caterpillars, and other victims, when a mischievous idea entered my idle mind, namely, to kill time by trying an experiment. Off I went and secured a capful of ants and their eggs from a neighbouring hill, and poured them over the pile of pine needles and fragments of bark I had under observation, expecting to see a great battle. Not a bit of it ; the strangers were welcomed with open arms, so to speak, and shown the greatest hospitality, by having all their



Pheasant Brooding Her Chicks



Dragon Fly Caught by Small Spider



## Wild Life on a Surrey Moor

eggs carried indoors for them, and, I imagine, carefully deposited in the incubation department.

Of course, it is not the size of any brain-box but the quality of the material inside it that counts. However, I am bound to confess that my varied experiments upon these creatures, made with a view to learning something of their super-intelligence, have invariably ended in disappointment.

My wife grew tired of studying wood ants and their ways, and proposed taking a little stroll. She had not proceeded fifty yards, however, before she ran back in a great state of excitement to report a desperate battle in progress between a giant dragon fly and a pigmy spider. The latter had erected its web—a palpably flimsy affair—between two old grass stems standing dead and bare above the bright spring greenery, and constructed a cunningly hidden parlour under the empty seed-head of one of them. The dragon fly in “taking off” from the edge of the pond had struck the web and torn it to shreds, but in doing so had concentrated its threads in such a way that their combined strength held him struggling upside down, and the spider was attacking might and main.

It was veritably a case of Jack the Giant-killer and the Monster over again. There swung the enraged giant making desperate but ineffectual efforts to free himself and escape, whilst the wee spider—only one-twentieth his size—dashed in from time to time and inflicted a deadly bite. In a very short while the dragon fly gave up the ghost, and swung stiff and stark in the

## At Home with Wild Nature

wind, his glassy wings flashing and glinting in the sunshine like miniature heliograph mirrors.

After this the spider performed a miracle. Fastening thread upon thread to the comparatively huge body of his victim he retired to his parlour and did something which lifted the dragon fly up higher and higher until it was finally harvested home. Very fortunately I was able to secure the greater part of this truly wonderful performance in a moving-picture record before my supply of film gave out.

It is surprising how quickly and accurately wild creatures learn to differentiate between familiar and unfamiliar sounds. One day whilst stretched at full length in a plantation on the fringe of the moor this fact was suddenly and forcibly brought home to my mind. I was watching a squirrel hunting back and forth in a mossy sunlit glade, as if trying to find a nut he had hidden and couldn't remember where. He took not the slightest notice of the noisy clatter of a wood pigeon in the branches overhead, but the snapping of a rotten twig under the pressure of my elbow as I raised my body to get a better view of him approaching an intervening belt of bracken put the fear of death into his little heart, and away he scampered up the trunk of the nearest tree.

I was forcibly reminded of this some time afterwards whilst cinematographing a pair of ciril buntings feeding their young ones in a nest found for me by my son-in-law, Mr. Howard Bentham. The nest was situated within two yards of a much-used high road, and

## Wild Life on a Surrey Moor

although the birds took not the slightest notice of the noisy traffic they were scared off by the sound of my apparatus, even when a motor-'bus was passing.

Water voles live in sparing numbers in the banks of the sluggish streams that drain the moorland and do not appear to be troubled by many enemies, saving, perhaps, a solitary heron fishing for frogs or a blood-thirsty stoat on the prowl. Stoats sometimes wander great distances in search of their prey, and, although they do not love wet marshy ground, show not the slightest hesitation about plunging into and swimming across any stream or dyke too wide to be leapt over.

If a water vole when seized by a stoat should try to escape by rolling off a bank and carrying his enemy with him into deep water, the manœuvre does not save him, for the murderer never relaxes his hold, and ultimately swims ashore with his victim.

In a flat country birds generally tell you of the approach of a stoat or weasel by noisily mobbing him.

Alas! within the last decade or two dry summers and thoughtless wanderers with matches have sadly reduced the beautiful masses of golden gorse that used to adorn the dark stretches of our Surrey moor and provide excellent cover for the Dartford warbler and many another frail, feathered friend. This bird earned its popular name through being first discovered near to the town of Dartford in Kent by a Dr. Latham about a hundred and forty odd years ago. It is a lover of calm, sunny mornings, when the cock will mount the air and pipe his shrill ditty like a whitethroat, or deliver



## At Home with Wild Nature

it from the topmost spray of a bush with his long tail erected at a jaunty angle and the feathers on his head crested like those of a lark or jay.

Anyone unacquainted with the habits of this species might visit a favourite haunt on a dull, windy day, and, after a careful search, leave the place again under the honest impression that the Dartford warbler did not exist in that neighbourhood at all.

Many a glorious May morning have I sat on a little treeless peak of my Surrey moor and looked down upon a favourite haunt of this elusive creature. Let me try to picture it. The scene consisted of a long slope of the finest heather in the world, studded here and there on its nether half with clumps and solitary bushes of furze; in the middle distance a stretch of sour bogland, marked by little pools of stagnant water, and the deep ruts of an ancient cart track winding across its surface with the inconsequent waywardness of a snail's trail, succeeded by a low sandy ridge impenetrably covered with pile upon pile of golden gorse, now in the full glory of its bloom bearing, and beyond an old-time squatter's poverty-stricken clearing, with its red-tiled cottage standing out in pitiful loneliness against an almost black background of giant pine trees.

It will be noticed that my little word picture has been written in the past tense. Alas! yes, because heath fires and the wheels of many engines of war in training for sterner work on other shores have destroyed the beauty of the place almost beyond recognition. During my last visit I failed to find a single Dartford



Squirrel at Breakfast



Young Dartford Warbler Being Fed



Young Dartford Warblers



## Wild Life on a Surrey Moor

warbler anywhere in the neighbourhood, although the weather conditions were ideal.

The ancient cottage in the clearing and its solitary human occupant both provided ample evidence of the bravery of the human heart, past and present. One hot afternoon, when the weather and the heavy photographic gear I was carrying over my shoulder had dissipated my strength, I called and asked for a drink of water. Looking at me with a measure of suspicion the old fellow answered curtly: "None in the house." I persuaded him, however, to lower an old pail on the end of a crooked stick to the bottom of the well and draw me a supply containing newts and other repulsive-looking cattle. I was too far spent to be critical, so, as the little boy put it, "dranked and thanked" and took my departure full of meditation.

Something of the loneliness of the place will be gathered when I mention that the old man ultimately died in the cottage without human aid or comfort, and was not missed until some while after his demise.

Twice within the last twenty years I have seen the rare Montagu's harrier breeding on this moor, and at one time the hobby was more or less common in the woods round about, but the ubiquitous egg-collector has discovered its haunts, and extermination is, I fear, only a question of time.

The nightjar, goatsucker, or fern owl, as the bird is alternately called, may be heard on still evenings trilling away its curious song on nearly every common in the neighbourhood. Passing through the corner of a

## At Home with Wild Nature

wood on the edge of a favourite part of the ground under review in this chapter, my eye suddenly caught what appeared to be a piece of dead bark lying on the ground. A closer inspection revealed the fact that the object was a nightjar covering her pair of pebble-like eggs.

Of course, in the wilds of Surrey one misses the clear cool springs and prattling becks, the loud *cabow*, *cabeck*, *cabeck* of the grouse and the plaintive call note of the golden plover, but there are compensations. The ringing laugh of the yaffle, or green woodpecker, in the not far distant timber belts, telling, according to the weather lore of the country prophets, of coming rain, and the sweet cadences of the silver-tongued woodlark are hard to beat.

It is for the north countryman a rather strange experience to come upon great stretches of splendid heather without sheep track, blackcock, or red grouse, especially when he knows that this plant has decreased to such an extent in his own part of the world that the last-named bird may be found nesting in grass fields.

## CHAPTER IX

### SOME CURIOUS NOTES FROM MY DIARY

**T**HE unexpected sometimes happens to the field naturalist, for although wild creatures generally behave according to the established habits of their kind, occasionally an individual will startle the observer by stepping right outside the path of ordinary behaviour and doing something of the most original character.

For example, some years ago whilst sitting in my hiding-tent waiting for a song thrush to come back to her nest with food for a very hungry family of chicks, I saw a cock robin industriously feeding his mate sitting in a nest containing five eggs only a few yards away. He brought caterpillars and small worms along at such frequent intervals that Mrs. Robin became satiated and would not open her mouth to take another morsel from his bill, in spite of much tempting and hopping round. To my surprise, and delight also, I might add, he then flew over and gave the despised food to the young throats! and, needless to say, it was gulped down by them with great relish. After it had all been administered Mr. Redbreast stood and examined the little family with manifest admiration, first turning one eye and then the other to gaze upon the chicks. He fed them again and again with the most commendable industry, until his benevolence was cut short by the



## At Home with Wild Nature

return of the mother thrush, when he was quickly made to understand that his interference, however well intentioned, in her household affairs was not appreciated.

Whilst studying wild bird life in the Outer Hebrides in 1904 I fell in with the boldest dunlin I have ever tried to photograph. Her confidence in me was unbounded, and nothing I did seemed to frighten her. If I left my hiding-tent to remove some offending blade of grass waving in the foreground she only ran a few feet away and was back again on her eggs before I had time to re-establish myself behind the camera. After a nocturnal deluge of rain I revisited the place to see how she was faring, and found her in sad plight. The nest was half full of water, and a newly hatched young one drowned inside it. I built the structure up out of the flood by the addition of a handful or two of dry grass and returned the three remaining chipped eggs, with the satisfactory result that the chicks were all hatched off and taken away in safety. A day or two afterwards I was watching them running about with their parents, when, to my astonishment, a skylark singing blithely overhead abruptly finished his song, descended to the ground, and discovering some eligible item of food secured it and tried to give it to one of the young dunlins. This charitable action angered the mother bird mightily. Spreading her neck feathers out she set herself in the fighting attitude of a ruff, and ignominiously drove the skylark away.

A lady friend of mine one day noticed to her great

## Some Curious Notes from My Diary

surprise a blue tit industriously feeding a family of young song thrushes in a nest built in a climbing rose on one of the walls of her house, and as the bird persisted in doing so had it photographed in the act.

Birds are almost human in many respects. Individuals of different species sometimes show an innocent inquisitiveness not only in regard to the household affairs of members of their own species, but those of others with which they have nothing whatever in common.

Whilst waiting for a redwing to come back to her nest on the Dovre Fell in Norway one morning a male blue throat—a little bird not unlike our English robin—came along and critically examined the nest and its contents, but instantly took its departure when I attempted to turn the handle of my cinematograph camera and record his inquisitive demeanour.

I have known both house sparrows and tree sparrows show considerable interest in young cuckoos, in the rearing of which they had taken neither lot nor part.

In the summer of 1914 I recorded in moving pictures a member of the former species that came again and again to stare at a newly-fledged cuckoo reared by a pair of white wagtails near to the town of Haarlem, and whilst the writing of this book was in progress I witnessed precisely the same kind of inquisitiveness on the part of a female house sparrow. I was intently watching a young cuckoo that had just left the nest of a pair of hedge sparrows being fed by its foster parents, when the house sparrow came along and began to admire him

## At Home with Wild Nature

from the branch of a tree overhead. She stayed for quite a while, and the "gowk," as the cuckoo is known in some parts of the country, with the stupidity characteristic of its species, kept staring up and requesting food, for which his widely opened mouth showed grand accommodation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Wild rabbits are supposed to be animals of rigidly fixed habits instinctively ingrained by the experiences of countless generations of their kind, yet individuals will sometimes go off at a tangent, so to speak, and behave in quite an unorthodox manner.

Nine hundred and ninety-nine rabbits out of every thousand no doubt excavate their "stops" or nesting-burrows by night, but I have watched the odd one industriously scratching hers out right in the middle of a field in broad noonday. Somebody, I think it was Richard Jefferies, has written that rabbits shift the earth with their broad hind feet. This one did not. She stood on them, and with her fore feet shot the mould between her legs and out behind in a thick shower.

Rabbits suckle their young by night, and upon leaving the nesting-burrow bar the entrance hole up securely with mould for the first eight or nine days, and then leave it open, or partially so, after their offspring can see. This is the rule, but I have come upon the exceptions of one mother rabbit giving her babies nourishment by day and of another leaving the entrance





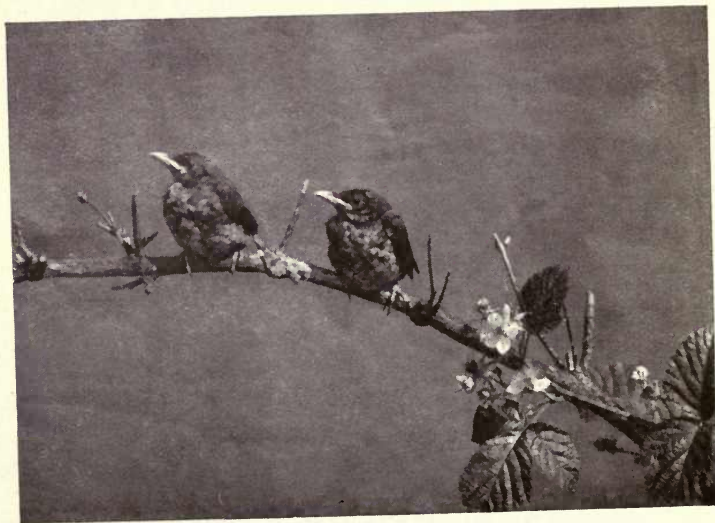
Male Common Sparrow



Female Blue Throat



Blackbird on Nest



Fledgeling Blackbirds

## Some Curious Notes from My Diary

hole of her "stop" unclosed long before her young ones had their eyes open.

If you were to ask one thousand men in any town, or part of the country for that matter, where rabbits spend the day nine hundred and ninety-nine of them would answer: "In burrows or holes in rocks, of course," unconscious of the fact that some rabbits never go near a hole of any sort or kind unless forced there by a dangerous enemy. Many rabbits that live in woods sit out all day long wet or fine, and keepers profess an ability to distinguish them from burrow dwellers by the darker tint of the fur along their backs.

At certain seasons of the year burrow dwellers will make a nice cosy "seat" in some rough tussock of grass, and if left undisturbed spend the whole day in it. I have watched rabbits go to their "seats" in the early hours of the morning on many occasions, but did not know until quite recently that they will sometimes do so, even in the late afternoon.

Crossing a hill after a heavy shower of snow that had fallen between two and three o'clock one day I noticed that a rabbit had left a wood immediately on my right, and hopped quite leisurely, as the character of its footprints indicated, out into the rough grass field through which I was passing. Expecting to discover its returning tracks a little farther down I walked on, but was disappointed. Returning to the point at which the animal had emerged from the wood I followed its footmarks until I came upon it squatting in a nice cosy "seat" under a bush. There were plenty of good



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burrows in the field it could have taken to for safety, supposing it had been driven out of the wood by a pursuing enemy, but the fact that it had entered the field in quite an unperturbed state of mind, and had not attempted to go near any hole or burrow entirely mystified me as to why it should be going to rest at such a peculiar hour of the day.

\* \* \* \* \*

An old friend of mine, who did a little pheasant preserving in a waterless wood on the North Downs, had tubs sunk here and there and filled with water for the convenience of his birds. In droughty weather these drinking-places were patronized all day long by crowds of thirsty feathered folk.

In the middle of one tub a large flint had been sunk in such a position that its upper part just stood above the level of the water, and small birds unable to drink from the sides of the vessel could alight upon it and sip and bathe at their leisure.

This particular tub was frequented every day by a hot and thirsty throng, drinking, splashing, quarrelling and swearing at each other to their hearts' content. I counted the representatives of sixteen different species one day, varying in size from a blue tit to a pheasant, and the artful methods adopted by the weak in order to rid themselves of the presence of the strong were almost unbelievable. Whilst a song thrush was standing on the flint enjoying a drink taken in leisurely sips a thirsty and impatient great tit came along, and, hop-

## Some Curious Notes from My Diary

ping round the tub with wings adroop, breast depressed, and bill raised at a threatening angle, showed clearly his desire to intimidate. Making no visible impression by these warlike displays the impudent wretch then attempted to alight on the throstle's back, and annoyed her until she took her departure.

I saw a robin a little later on treat an old male blackbird in a somewhat similar manner and with an equal degree of success. A spotted flycatcher in possession of the flint proved to be made of sterner stuff, and refused to be bullied into taking his departure before he was ready. His method of answering intimidation was to lower his wings, raise his head, and, glaring defiantly, snap his bill like the jaws of a trap. A great tit, a robin, and a rather stupid-looking bullfinch tried one after another to oust the plucky little fellow, but without success.

On one occasion perfect pandemonium suddenly reigned in the hazel bushes and ash stalls growing all round the tub. Blackbirds and chaffinches made the wood ring with their loud and persistent alarm notes; great tits and robins added their jarring cries of anger, and the wee brown wren began to tell all and sundry to beware. I knew some hated enemy was at hand, and presently a stoat crept under some trailing primrose leaves on the edge of the tub, and reaching down took a few laps of the water. Upon raising his head he gazed steadily at my lens for a moment, and was portrayed in the act.

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## At Home with Wild Nature

Mentioning a robin reminds me of a curious incident I witnessed in my orchard one day. During the latter part of the Great War I tried my hand, like many another old man useless for active service, at increasing the country's food supply by keeping pigs. I fed my intelligent and affectionate animals and washed out their abode every day, and welcomed the presence of two small pensioners—a robin and a common mouse—that lived mainly upon the unconsidered trifles to be picked up in and around my sty. One evening the latter popped out of his hole to seize a titbit that had ebbed over the side of the pigs' trough above him, but the robin had also noticed it from his perch in a privet hedge close at hand, and his heart was filled with malice and envy. Instead of snatching the morsel of food, which was easily within his reach and speed, he descended upon the "wee tim'rous beastie" like a winged fury. The unfortunate mouse was struck broadside on, and after rolling over and over was fain to pick himself up and beat a hasty, if undignified, retreat to the safety of his hole, leaving his selfish aggressor in undisputed possession of all the privileges.

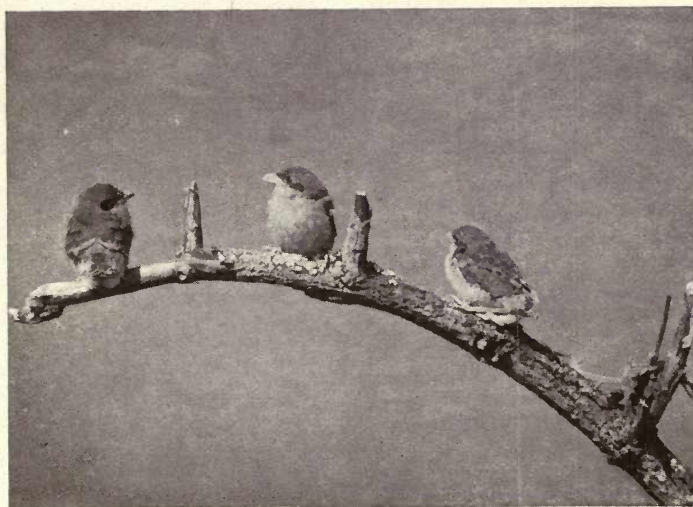
\* \* \* \* \*

Birds sometimes quarrel over the possession of prey. Whilst crossing a disused rifle range in my neighbourhood one morning I suddenly came upon a jay and a pair of red-backed shrikes, engaged in a great scuffle in a grassy opening on the edge of a thick forest of thorn bushes. To my surprise the jay was





Male Red-backed Shrike and Young



Fledgeling Red-backed Shrikes



Cock Chaffinch at Nest

## Some Curious Notes from My Diary

driven off by the combined efforts of the shrikes, and I naturally concluded the latter had a nest containing young ones somewhere near by, which they were defending with the super courage born of parenthood. Not a bit of it. To my astonishment I discovered that the quarrel was over the possession of a newly slain short-tailed field vole. Whether the jay or the shrikes had killed the rodent it is, of course, impossible to say.

If feathered folk were classified by their habits the red-backed shrike would find a place amongst the birds of prey, for its methods and manners are essentially hawk-like. One day I came upon a male butcher bird engaged in feeding a family of five lusty young ones in a nest I had found a week previously on the old rifle-range. I could not understand why the bird kept on flying from his nesting bush to a diminutive thorn growing a few yards away and then came back again, but upon a closer approach discovered to my horror that he was engaged in tearing to pieces the pathetically small body of a baby blue tit, which he had just slain and spitted, and giving the fragments to his own offspring. The crude, healthy instinct of avenging the wrongs of the weak and defenceless surged up within me with such primitive force that I think if I had had a gun in my hands at the moment I would have shot him.

\* \* \* \* \*

In wandering through the brevities of my diary for the last quarter of a century I have come upon some



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curious entries in regard to song birds and their habits of borrowing notes from each other. In Surrey the song thrush will embody the rather raucous call notes of the French or red-legged partridge in its repertoire, whilst in Aberdeenshire the low, musical voice of the ringed plover is not infrequently borrowed.

Both blackbirds and song thrushes in West Surrey now imitate the notes of the curlews that have within recent years resorted to that part of the county to breed, and in the spring of the year 1919 a member of the former species always commenced his song with three notes from a tune he had recently heard Canadian soldiers whistling in and round a training camp close at hand.

Blackbirds and throstles both occasionally sing whilst on the wing. I have heard the latter holding forth whilst standing on a chimney-pot from which a volume of smoke, to which he had his tail turned, was rising, and all this with plenty of suitable trees within fifty yards of him. Why such a bird should select such a position it is impossible to understand. Some years ago I found sanctuary in my garden for the most original male bird of this species it has ever been my pleasure to study. He habitually sang whilst hopping about on the lawn searching for worms for a family of chicks in a laurel bush a few yards away. Whether it was a case of "song lightening toil" or a little heart bubbling over with uncontrollable happiness I could never determine.

It is popularly supposed that birds sing, call, and do

## Some Curious Notes from My Diary

nearly everything else throughout their adventurous lives by instinct. Such is by no means the case. They have, like human beings, to learn many things in the great school of experience. Twice in my life I have come upon cock house sparrows that never uttered a note common to their species.

Not long ago I visited a very old lady relative who was bedridden, but mentally clear and bright as a top form schoolgirl. Upon entering the house her nurse said to me : "Miss Kearton has had a pet sparrow given to her in a cage, but for Heaven's sake do not tell her it is a sparrow, she thinks it is a rare bird from some remote part of the earth and will be offended." I asked for its history and was told that it had been picked up by a bird lover after falling out of a nest in the guttering of some house under repair, and reared in an aviary amongst canaries and other cage pets.

I instantly realized that I was on the horns of a very awkward dilemma, namely, to make choice between a hateful deception and an unpleasant truth.

I was ushered into my relative's bedchamber with feelings of vehement hatred towards the whole race of sparrows, and hers in particular. My eye instantly caught the unnaturally clean brute in his gilt cage, and after the usual salutations I carefully sat down with my back towards him in order to lessen his chances of attracting attention. His manners were not equal, however, to the strain the situation put upon him, and instead of maintaining a well-bred silence he persisted in

## At Home with Wild Nature

expressing his opinions in quite unsparrow-like language, it is true, but with the unconcealed intention of riveting my notice or that of his mistress upon him.

At last he succeeded. During a momentary lull in the conversation my kinswoman suddenly requested me to pass the bird-cage over to her bed. I did so in fear and trembling, but managed to suppress any indication of my emotions. After talking in the usual extravagantly endearing terms old ladies indulge in when addressing their pets and being answered by the garrulous bird in his terse borrowed notes, she suddenly turned upon me with the dread question: "What is the bird?"

The query came like the crack of a pistol fired point-blank at my head, but I was ready for it, and quietly answered: "Oh, it's not very rare, Miss Kearton, I've seen plenty of specimens in America. Scientists call it *Passer domesticus*."

Luckily the high-sounding Latin name appeared to satisfy her, but I left the town by a train departing earlier than the one I intended to catch.

\* \* \* \* \*

The songs of some birds can easily be translated into human phrases. To me that of the chaffinch always sounds exactly like the words, "see, see, see, Joe Dobson's very near," but to the Sussex peasants it represents the words, "Quick-quick-quick, fetch me a bottle o' ginger beer"; whilst to the ear of poor Richard



## Some Curious Notes from My Diary

Jefferies, Nature's great prose poet, it sounded like,  
" *Will you, will you, kiss me dear.*"

\* \* \* \* \*

The love affairs of wild birds do not always run smoothly. In many species desperate battles are fought by the males for the favours of the fair.

During the war I had a male house sparrow living in and around my garden for two years in succession, and although a bird of comely appearance, except for a little bald patch at the back of his head (which rendered him easy of identification), he never succeeded in securing a mate. In the spring of 1918 he laboured hard and lovingly, carrying all manner of straws, feathers, and bits of string into a nesting-box I had fixed in an old apple tree for the use of wrynecks or great tits. When his task was finished he sat by the hour together and prosily sang the praises of his cosy nest from the topmost branch of the tree, but no lady member of his species ever came near. If he espied one flying overhead he called after her with the utmost vigour and persistence, but without attracting the slightest notice from any female of his kind. I felt very sorry for him. His gentlemanly methods were too original to be appreciated. He no doubt knew more about the methods and manners of his kind than I did, but the most approved way of wooing in the sparrow world had always appeared to me to consist of a little vigorous clubbing and a great deal of excited abuse in some unseemly hedgerow mêlée.

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Anyway, poor old Philip, as we named him, failed to secure a mate, and remained a forlorn bachelor until the late summer, when he adopted two little orphans of his own species and brought them every day into my kitchen to be fed. For a time he appeared to be quite happy over his self-imposed task, then a regrettable thing happened. His adopted children very ungratefully turned against him and would not even tolerate his presence inside my house. This was too much for human flesh and blood to bear, so I drove the young blackguards off, and poor old Philip once more resumed his position of favoured guest in my establishment.

\* \* \* \* \*

Birds not only select odd quarters sometimes in which to build their nests, but utilize strange materials in their construction. I have seen the bulky home of a heron made entirely of old wire, and quite recently a pair of pigeons somewhere in the West End of London built a nest of fugitive hairpins picked up in the streets. Some years ago whilst studying sea-fowl life on the Saltee Islands off the Wexford coast I came upon a shag or green cormorant's eggs lying in an eyrie made entirely from the backbones of dead rabbits.

The members of non-nest building species, such as brown owls and kestrels, habitually utilize the old homes of carrion crows, rooks, and wood pigeons. I have known a song thrush to renovate and line the old nest of a blackbird with mud and bits of decaying wood and then lay a clutch of eggs in it, also an instance of

## Some Curious Notes from My Diary

the latter bird lining the old home of a throstle with nice soft, dead grass and then utilizing it. Twice at least in my life I have seen the disused home of a black-bird profusely lined with rabbits' down and then occupied by a pair of great tits. Not many years ago I discovered a cole tit sitting on a clutch of eggs in a brown wren's nest built in ivy growing on a garden wall. Stranger still, perhaps, humble bees will occasionally carry moss into the last-named bird's wee home and breed in it.

\* \* \* \* \*

I am sometimes asked how long it takes a bird to build its nest. Everything depends upon the architecture of the species and circumstances. An elaborate structure like that of the bottle tit, made of an incredible number of wee bits of lichen and cobwebs on the outside and lined upon occasion with as many as two thousand separate feathers, naturally occupies a far longer time in building than the scanty cradle of a peewit, consisting only of a little hollow lined with a handful of dry straws.

In the early part of the breeding season a pair of robins will occupy a whole fortnight in building, going about their task in the most leisurely manner for an hour or two in the morning, and then flying away to enjoy themselves for the rest of the day. At the height of the breeding season, however, when conditions demand a more strenuous application of labour I have



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known a nest to be commenced and finished in the short space of three days.

In the spring of 1918 a pair of hedge sparrows completely eclipsed this performance in lightning construction by commencing and finishing a nest in my garden in a single day! I watched them at work "from early morn till dewy eve," and timed their journeyings on my watch. At one period of the forenoon they brought bits of moss and down along to the tune of eight times in fifteen minutes! That was, of course, counting their combined efforts.

\* \* \* \* \*

In my wanderings I have been attacked by parent birds of different species, from frail little wood wrens to great skuas, in defence of their young. Some years ago I went down to Reading to photograph a robin's nest built in a book-case at a girls' school. Directly I was shown into the room the irate bird darted from a row of old volumes and flew straight at me. Here is an extract from my diary describing her behaviour: "Robin chased me up and down room as I moved to adjust camera, striking at my head and hands until my capless pate tingled all over from her pecking attacks."

The headmistress told me the impudent little creature had visited nearly every bedroom in the school, as the varied tints of human hair to be seen in the lining of her somewhat elaborate nest testified.

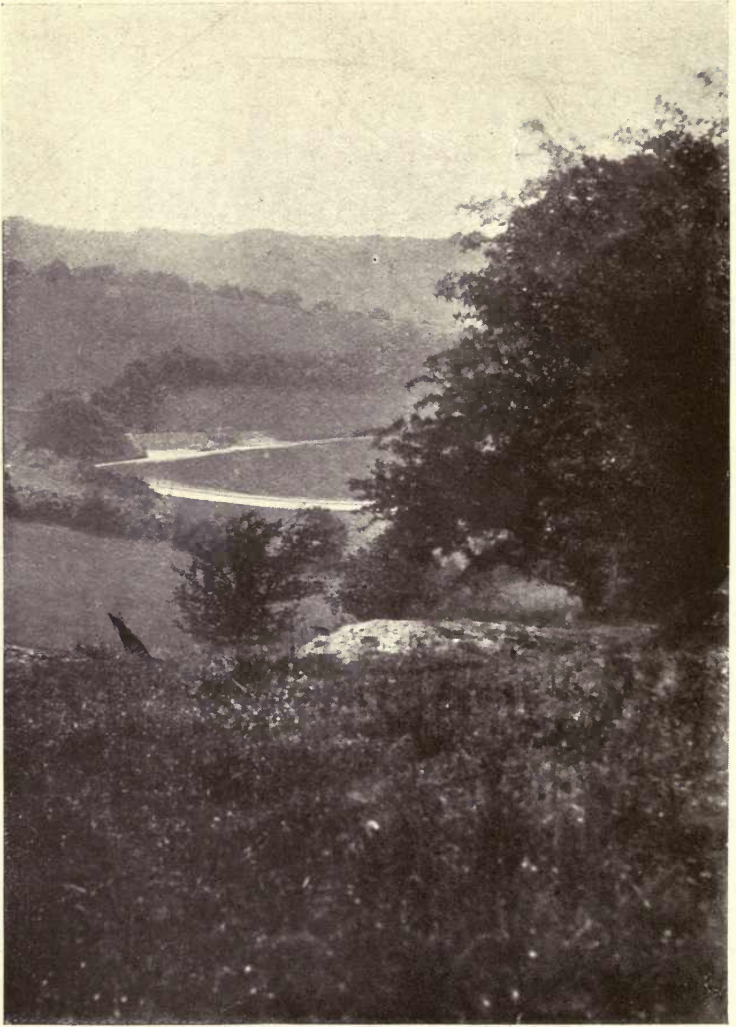
\* \* \* \* \*



Robin Redbreast



Newly-fledged Robins



A Fox Caught Napping



## Some Curious Notes from My Diary

If you remain absolutely still and the wind is in your favour wild birds and beasts, when deeply absorbed in affairs of their own, will sometimes approach within a few feet without becoming aware of your presence. One day whilst lying close to a wooden rail fence dividing a rough pasture from a spinney I heard a family of great tits chattering to each other as they hunted for insects in a large thorn tree almost over my head. Presently my attention was attracted by the rapid pattering of small feet over a collection of dead leaves not far away, and a pair of stoats came galloping along. They heard the young birds overhead, and without the slightest hesitation ran up the trunk of the thorn like a couple of squirrels and tried, but unsuccessfully, to catch one of the tits.

Luckily for the chicks their watchful old mother detected the danger in time and rang out an angry alarm note which stampeded the whole family on the instant. The stoats, quickly recognizing that their chances had vanished, descended to the ground and trotted away close past me, without, I am persuaded, discovering my presence by sight or scent.

Walking along the crown of a hill one evening with a stereoscopic camera over my shoulder I saw a fox sitting outside his "earth" or burrow deeply absorbed in the doings of a number of workmen making a road in the valley below. I crept steadily forward until I was within a few yards of him, and quietly lowering the legs of my tripod to the ground exposed a plate upon him in a very poor light before he turned his head and

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caught sight of me, when the spell was broken in a flash, and he went to ground. It is hardly necessary for me to add that the wind was blowing from the fox towards me, otherwise his olfactory nerves would have warned him of my approach long, long before I neared his "earth."

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